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**Project Based Learning: Enriching Counselor Education
Through Real World Learning**

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The purpose of this article is to contribute to counselor education pedagogy by highlighting the value of project based learning in counselor training programs. This paper describes a project based learning module enacted within an advanced group class of doctoral counselor education students that required students to design and implement an empirically grounded group intervention. CACREP standards for doctoral students (2009) and the Association for Specialists in Group Work: Best Practices Document (2007) are used as a frame of reference to demonstrate the advantages of project work for promoting broad based learning outcomes in counselor training environments.

Counselor Education Pedagogy

Counselor educators function in the dual capacity as professional stewards and instructors in the art and science of counseling. Similar to other applied human sciences, this responsibility exceeds the vacuous imparting of professional knowledge from instructor to students (Granello, 2000; Kiener, 2007; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Sexton, 1998). In addition to ensuring students develop the requisite knowledge and counseling skills for professional competency, counselor educators must assist their students meaningfully connect theory to professional practice, foster critical thinking and life-long learning, and promote professional identity development (Granello, 2000). Yet, compared to their academic brethren in teacher training and adult education, counselor educators have largely neglected establishing a scholarly base to understand and inform

instructional methodologies that best promote these wide-ranging learning outcomes (Granello, 2000; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Sexton, 1998). A search of the literature in *Counselor Education & Supervision* (CES) journal utilizing a combination of terms including ‘pedagogy,’ ‘counselor education pedagogy,’ ‘counseling and teaching,’ yielded limited results and a recent review of CES publication patterns from 1985 to 2009 (Crockett, Byrd, Erford, & Hays, 2010) reveals a persistent paucity in the publication of teaching oriented articles.

In the absence of a clearly articulated pedagogical foundation, counselor educators can augment their knowledge by looking outside the counseling literature to discern trends and developments in the field of scholarship and learning in higher education (Kiener, 2007). The most definitive trend in higher education is the shift from traditional pedagogical towards andragogical teaching models (Pew, 2007). The former denotes a teacher-centric learning model in which students depend on their instructors to disseminate relevant material through teacher-controlled methods such as the lecture-seminar format (Pew, 2007). By contrast, the andragogical model is premised on the assumption that students, not teachers, are the locus for learning. This paradigm casts teachers in a facilitative capacity whose central role is to establish educational environments ripe for cultivating self directed, intrinsically driven learners (Pew, 2007). Andragogical teaching intersects with constructivist, contextual, and social cognitive learning theories that posit educational processes are key to eliciting favorable educational outcomes (Kiener, 2007). Accordingly, andragogically sound teaching practices are rooted in tenants of active learning, and encompass experiential activities, problem based learning, project based learning, and service learning, and echo the principles of ‘learning by doing’ popularized by John Dewey in the formative years of the 21st century (1938).

Counselor educators encounter a persistent set of instructional dilemmas that could be attended through the application of andragogical methods (Kiener, 2007). Documented in the literature is the limitation presented by a single content area class for adequately inculcating core domain knowledge, such as research, group, and clinical skills (Fernando & Hulse-Killacky, 2006; Granello, 2000; Killacky & Hulse-Killacky, 2004). Furthermore, in real world settings, knowledge is not neatly packaged into discrete content areas, as professionals are compelled to synthesize knowledge in the context of daily problem solving and professional practice (Peterson & Myer, 1995). Andragogical methods, such as project and problem based learning promote curricula fusion as students are required to apply their theoretical understanding to generate solutions for real world scenarios (Kiener, 2007). Concerns have also been raised regarding the suitability of traditional didactic teaching for meeting the needs of today’s diverse student body and for preparing counselors in training for the complexity of work in a pluralistic society (Granello, 2000; Sexton, 1998). Available research indicates andragogical approaches attend to a broader array of learning styles and engender critical thinking (Keiner, 2007; Pew, 2007), a prerequisite of self-reflective counselors responsive to the diversity and vicissitudes of practice in the contemporary mental health settings.

Another critical determinant of effective counselor training environments is the extent programs can assist students translate counseling theory into professional competency (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Historically, practicum and internship requirements have fulfilled this function; nonetheless a recent concentration of articles

has suggested counseling preparation programs forfeit time, in respect to fostering student's professional growth, by stalling exposure to real world conditions until the culmination of student's formal studies (Burnett, Long, & Home, 2005; Granello 2000; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). The limitations of classroom context for shaping counseling skill and identity has been offset, to a degree, by the field's rich tradition of experiential learning including role play, live observations, and mock counseling groups learning. Although these practices are aligned with an andragogical paradigm, the counseling discipline, thus far, lacks a clearly articulated instructional base to provide the rationale for their inclusion (Granello, 2000; Kiener, 2007). Moreover, from a learning theory perspective, specialized skill sets derived outside of context do not automatically transfer to the real world settings, as illustrated by counseling students' struggle to reach synthesis between erudition and real-world application in practicum and internship settings (Granello, 2000).

This instructional dilemma is reflected by the steady number of publications expressing concern that counselor educators engage their pre-practicum students, to the greatest extent possible, in authentic learning experiences (Burnett et al., 2005; Granello, 2000; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Recent publications have demonstrated the value of service learning in community settings for curriculum enrichment, professional skill development, and personal growth (Burnett et al., 2005; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Aside from these articles, the professional literature offers little in the way of guidance to counselor educators on how to establish learning environments that approximate real world conditions outside of practicum and internship.

Project Based Learning

The purpose of this article is to contribute toward the construction of a pedagogical base in counselor education by highlighting the value of project based learning for counselor training programs. Project based learning is a learner centered strategy, rooted in the andragogical paradigm, which requires students to respond to a complex task or question by applying their knowledge and understanding of the phenomena in a problem solving or decision making capacity, culminating in an end product relevant to the question or problem (Williams & Hmelo, 1998). The rationale for incorporating project-based learning into counselor education is not new. Peterson and Myer (1995) implemented a class wide project to simulate *en vivo* challenges of working life in a community agency. More recently McAuliffe and Eriksen (2010) have described the merits of projects for cultivating autonomous learners, promoting curriculum mastery, and forging student bonding.

Project based learning is an inherently flexible instructional tool that can be tailored in scope to meet instructional course objectives and students' developmental learning needs (Barron et al., 1998). Projects can be used as ancillary means to expand real world application in traditional didactic classrooms. Alternatively courses can be designed with the intent that the project itself serves as the central catalyst for learning and instruction (Barron et al., 1998). The professor in this discussion selected the latter option for several reasons. The context for the project was an advanced doctoral level group counseling class in a large urban university. From a developmental perspective, the students possessed a foundational knowledge of group dynamics and theory from their

Master's studies, and could handle a cognitively challenging assignment befitting of their doctoral student status. Furthermore CACREP standards require programs to provide educational environments 'beyond the entry level' (2009).

Project Design

In utilizing a class project as the primary vehicle for instruction, the professor was cognizant to attend to project design principles that promote high-quality learning: (a) developing an appropriate question relevant to curriculum learning goals; (b) embedding opportunities for teaching; (c) incremental assessment and revision; and (d) ensuring equity of work distribution (Barron et al., 1998).

Developing an appropriate question that connects project activities to the underlying educational constructs is critical to the success of project-based learning (Barron et al., 1998). CACREP standards for doctoral students suggest that learning environments promote knowledge and skills in the areas of professional identity, professional practice, research, scholarship, teaching, and leadership (2009). The professor wanted to craft an assignment that was relevant to the content of group counseling yet fostered growth across those broad domains and served as a unifying group experience. To that end he set the class (N= 8) the task of creating, coordinating, operating, and evaluating a realistic personal growth group for implementation at the end of the semester with a real population of undergraduate clients concurrently enrolled in an introduction to counseling course. The professor also stipulated that the group should be brief, spanning no more than four hours, and maintain a positive orientation.

It is worth noting that students in the undergraduate counseling class are routinely required to participate in at least one counseling session. During this particular semester, students were given the option of fulfilling this requirement via traditional counseling or participating in the doctoral student lead personal growth group.

Additional design principles attended to in advance by the professor related to the role he would play in shaping the direction of the group project. Consistent with an andragogical method, the professor opted to serve in a primarily facilitative capacity, thus, encouraging students to take ownership for their learning. However, because the project would be implemented with live subjects, he allocated significant class time for students to work on the project. This logistical decision also provided an avenue for him to monitor the project, process critical learning, provide feedback, and intervene in a supervisory capacity as needed. Equity of student work distribution was addressed through a four prong grading system: students were to receive a final group grade based on the group's quality in respect to theory and content. However individual grades were also assigned based on student's weekly participation in class, a final peer evaluation by each team of each team member, and the submission of a reflection paper discussing learning and affective experiences.

The following section describes the diverse range of learning outcomes derived by students in the context of the group project. These experiences have been consolidated within this paper by the first and fourth author, based on their participation as doctoral students in the project, and in consultation with their fellow classmates and the class instructor. In an effort to demonstrate project based learning's value as a pedagogical tool in counseling education, the authors align learning outcomes with professional standards as outlined by CACREP's doctoral standards for counselor education and supervision

programs (2009) and by the Association for Specialists in Group Work: Best Practices document (2007).

Learning Outcomes

Group process.

ASGW standards: B.2, C.2.

Project work has been identified as an effective strategy for fostering student connectedness in graduate counseling programs (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010). The doctoral students in this discussion were a disparate group of commuter students separated by a geographical diameter of 140 miles. The students did not belong to an established cohort and most held full time positions that precluded them from developing working collegial relationships. In the light of research identifying the merits of cohort groups for facilitating intellectual stimulation, group solidarity and enhanced graduation rates (Lewis, Asher, Hayes & Ieva, 2010), the professor believed a group project spanning an entire semester that required students to function in task group capacity might foster student bonding analogous to experiences within a doctoral student cohort. Although a simulated group experience was not a formal component of the group project, the value of project based learning, as an instructional tool, is the incidental learning that occurs as a natural outcome of the process (Barron et al., 1998). Students report that the experience of team development, particularly as they had few prior collaborative experiences together, in many respects was parallel to the stages through which a counseling group progresses (Tuckman, 1965). In the early days of the project the students struggled to get started. The research on personal growth groups was diffuse and inconclusive and their efforts to obtain further direction and clarification from the professor were unsuccessful as he remained tacit and adopted the role of participant observer. In hindsight, the team members identified this period as their *forming* stage as the group floundered in the absence of clear direction, leadership, and group decision-making norms. Students have also identified a brief overlapping *storming* phase, in which they expressed increasing frustration towards the professor's evasive leadership. However, the pressure of an impending deadline and grade concerns compelled the group to act autonomously. Subsequently, the team entered a *norming* phase, developing protocol for decision-making and rules for shared responsibility. Henceforth the team began a period of *performing*, during which time the team successfully harnessed the professional expertise and personal strengths of its individual team members in preparation for the counseling group. Essentially, the teams' migration through the stages of group formation simulated a realistic group experience and provided the context for students to enhance their understanding of group processes and further sensitize them to client experience. Furthermore, in a parallel process, the students' evolution into a functioning task group increased their sense of mutual support and group membership, creating bonds and scholarly partnerships that have outlasted the semester class.

Group planning: Conceptual and theoretical framework.

ASGW standards: A.2., A.4.b., B.2, C.2.

CACREP standards: C1., G1., G3., H.2.

The doctoral students understood that a theory-driven group intervention would provide the conceptual base for developing meaningful activities and research questions.

This required the team to operationalize the concept of a personal growth group, delineate the psychological constructs to be targeted, and select an appropriate counseling theory. Students' research revealed that goal setting and planning groups are amenable to brief intervention and positively impact client well being and affect (MacLeod, Coates, & Hetherington, 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002). Although more structured in nature than traditional personal growth groups, goal setting and planning groups fulfilled the requirement of fostering a positive atmosphere as research indicates that people feel good when they focus on desirable future outcomes (MacLeod et al., 2008). In addition, the team hypothesized that the group experience would promote personal growth by engaging participants in a strength-based goal setting activities.

The decision to structure a group intervention around goal setting dovetailed into research demonstrating the positive relationship between self-efficacy, goal setting, and achievement orientation (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). A central requirement of the project was for the team to develop instrumentation to measure the effectiveness of the intervention. Given the extant research, the group decided that bolstering client self efficacy would provide for a valuable and meaningful group experience and consolidate participants' commitment to their goals that may persist after the conclusion of the group. Furthermore, self-efficacy and motivation presented constructs viable for psychometric measurement.

Group planning: Counseling activities.

ASGW standards: A.4.c.

The next major task facing the team, after determining an optimum conceptual framework, was to develop a congruent curriculum that meaningfully expedited the goal setting process in a four-hour intervention. In an effort to distribute responsibility equally among team members, each was given the task of providing a group intervention aligned with the selected theory and constructs. The doctoral students involved in the advanced group course came from a wide variety of counseling areas. Among the group were specialists in school, substance abuse, family, and crisis-intervention. With this wide variety of experience the doctoral students had to balance constructing a program that reflected the teams members individual strengths yet provided for a seamless flow of activities within the group session. The challenge presented to the team was how to adapt and sequence activities into a meaningful and integrated program.

Multicultural considerations.

ASGW standards: A.3.a., B.8.

CACREP standards: H.2., H.3.

Research suggests that participation in multicultural activities in natural settings is the most effective method of training multiculturally competent practitioners; however, these conditions are difficult to emulate outside of internships (Dickson, Jepson, & Barbee, 2008). The project based learning module provided multiple opportunities for students to cultivate their multicultural sensitivity. Students enrolled in the introduction to counseling classes, who would be serving as the clients, were predominately non-traditional, mid-life, majority African American females, and were from the university college, a more flexible degree program designed for late entry students. Doctoral students in the project team would serve as group leaders. The doctoral students were

concerned that evident demographic differences between group members and leaders would serve as a barrier to group cohesion and potentially create resistance. In an effort to establish therapeutic group conditions in a brief intervention period, the doctoral team agreed to adopt an egalitarian leadership style, favored by solution focused therapists, that encourages clients to perceive themselves as the experts of their own lives (De Jong & Berg, 1998). The doctoral team anticipated this approach may minimize client resistance stemming from perceived sociological and life cycle differences. Moreover, by emphasizing clients' innate problem solving capacity and resiliency, group leaders could help validate their life stories, empower them to establish goals, and avoid psychologizing their experiences, inappropriate for quasi-realistic brief group intervention.

Ethical considerations.

ASGW standards: A.6., A.7.b., A.7.d.

CACREP standard: C. 7.

Ethics and professional disclosure was another counseling content area encompassed contextually within the project. Although the group counseling intervention was inherently positive and action oriented, the doctoral students wanted to ensure participant welfare by adherence to professional ethical codes. It was decided that a uniform statement be included in each team leader's packet that explicitly covered professional disclosure and informed consent with each group. Doctoral students also compiled a list of referral sources in the event clients expressed a desire to continue therapy or exhibited signs of psychological distress. As the setting was a university campus, doctoral students were aware that there was the possibility of having a pre-existing relationship with some group participants. To avoid this ethical dilemma, doctoral students met and arranged group composition together.

Program coordination.

ASGW Standard: A. 5.

Peterson and Myer (1995) suggested that project based learning facilitates concrete, field specific knowledge that mimics professional practice. As program coordinators, the doctoral team was also responsible for the practical exigencies of developing and managing a counseling group. In this situation the team were responsible for securing a comfortable building, developing and communicating a schedule, and planning for the unexpected, including crisis. The team had been informed to expect around 64 clients. With this number in mind the team decided to divide the clients into groups of around 10, assigning a doctoral student to each group. This arrangement would allow 2 of the 8 doctoral students to serve as project managers, responsible for auxiliary activities related to group coordination and serve as floaters during the group session to attend to any unforeseen issues and assist the team leaders as needed. These types of practical learning experiences, relevant to professional practice, yet seldom addressed in didactic settings, are examples of work embedded knowledge yielded through project based learning.

Research.

ASGW standards: A.4.e.

CACREP standards: C.5., E.3., F.1., F.2.

The team had been given the task to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of their group intervention. Demonstrating knowledge and skills in the area of research and scholarship is a core CACREP standard for an accredited doctoral program. Nonetheless, many of the students felt overwhelmed and unsure of their abilities to conduct original research, despite having completed classes in quantitative and qualitative research design. This reflects studies suggesting that knowledge acquired in statistics courses is unlikely to transfer across settings, unless students are given opportunities for applied practice (Granello, 2000). By contrast, scholarly productivity has been found to increase when doctoral students are afforded opportunities to engage in the research process with the provision of faculty mentoring and collegial support (Fernando & Hulse-Killacky, 2006). The group project provided an ideal forum to establish these conditions. First, students were required to activate their knowledge of statistical procedures for applied research purposes. Second, those students less confident in their ability to conduct original research benefited from working alongside peers with more sophisticated research skills. Students have subsequently suggested this project provided an authentic research experience that gave them the knowledge, skills, and efficacy to pursue future empirical inquiries and move forward with their dissertation research.

Doctoral students were responsible for building their assessment tool from the ground up. Their earlier efforts to construct a counseling group based on a strong theoretical orientation made the task of developing instrumentation relatively straightforward. The team decided to develop a Likert scale to measure motivation, goal setting, and self-efficacy. Likert scales have the advantage of being relatively easy to construct, yield reliable scores, and offer flexibility in measuring a range of affective responses (Pershing, 2000). Each doctoral student was responsible for presenting potential survey items that adequately addressed the psychological constructs being measured. Due to the positive nature of the group, the doctoral students decided that it would be important to not only include a pre-test/post-test, but to also include a follow-up assessment roughly 6 weeks later to attempt to control for any halo effects that might occur directly following the intervention.

Program evaluation.

ASGW standards: A.3.b., B.7.

CACREP standards: C.1., C.3., E.1., E.4., F.6.

CACREP requires doctoral students to know the methods and models of program evaluation. However, unless students develop dissertation questions that incorporate program evaluation procedures, their knowledge of program evaluation is unlikely to extend beyond the conceptual level. Given the current climate of accountability in both school and community counseling settings (Astramovich & Coker, 2007), it seems imperative that prospective counselor educators have both theoretical and practical knowledge of program evaluation methodology.

The empowerment that doctoral students experienced in the context of the team afforded them confidence to engage in research procedures that they had hitherto found intimidating. Thus, in addition to the assessment instrument measuring persistent treatment effects, the doctoral team developed a survey to measure participant perception

of both the program and group leader. Team members hoped that the first group could serve as a proto-type and they anticipated utilizing the combined results of the surveys to assess if the current focus on self efficacy impacted goal setting and motivation, and refine program content for subsequent offerings of the brief group. The inclusion of a program evaluation component echoes previous studies suggesting andragogical instructional practices foster intrinsically oriented, self-directed learners (Kiener, 2007; Pew, 2007).

Professional identity: Professional competency.

ASGW standards: A.8.a., A.8.e., B.2., C.2.

CACREP standards: G1., G2., G3., H.2., H.3.

Professional identity has been conceptualized through a developmental lens in which trainee counselors and new counseling professionals proceed through phases of confusion, anxiety, and dependency towards confidence, competence/autonomy, and collegiality (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986). Attaining professional identity is viewed as an individuation process, precipitated during practicum and internship as the graduate students begin to integrate ideology and theory with practical experience. The group project provided a professional induction experience that in many respects patterned these phases of development and served to consolidate students' professional identities as clinicians, researchers, and educators. The anxiety and confusion experienced by students at the beginning of the project was displaced at the culmination of the project by feelings of mastery and competence. The class project cast them into unfamiliar terrain without clear guidelines or precedence; furthermore, the class had limited experience working together as a functional team. By serving as program creators, coordinators, counselors, and evaluators, the doctoral students were stretched to synthesize their professional knowledge and skills; their efforts resulting in the creation of viable goal setting program that could easily be adapted for use in a variety of counseling settings.

Professional identity: Ongoing research and faculty collaboration.

CACREP standards: B1., B.2., B.4., F.1., F.3., F.4.

CACRPEP standards call for doctoral programs to provide doctoral students with collaborative experiences with faculty. The project created an educational milieu that was markedly different from a traditional instructor-student dynamic. Students were responsible for both the process and product and the instructor functioned in a consultancy and mentoring capacity. The project engendered a climate of faculty-student collaboration that spurred a variety of scholarly partnerships that transcended the term project. Currently students are working with faculty to analyze and report the data generated from the group experience, report upon the pedagogical model (as reflected in this paper), and incorporate the goal setting group template into the master's level program.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to describe vibrant educational experiences fostered through project based learning and to demonstrate its advantages as a pedagogical tool in counselor education. Projects culminate in the creation of a product, represented in this project by the goal-setting group; yet the product was subsidiary to the process in respect

to learning outcomes. The goal setting group itself was a success by all accounts: initial client feedback, both formal and informal, was highly enthusiastic. Moreover, students enrolled in the master's level group counseling class have recently implemented the model created by the doctoral students. During this iteration, the clientele continue to be drawn from the introductory counseling class, yet master's students serve as the group leaders, thus extending opportunities for counseling students to access the benefits of hands on learning prior to practicum placement.

From a pedagogical perspective, the inherent value of the project was doctoral students' contextual learning and professional growth. This class wide project facilitated wide reaching learning opportunities, documented in this paper, that would have been difficult to emulate using traditional didactic teaching methodology. The team was challenged to work together to produce an empirically grounded counseling intervention and commensurate measurement instrument from the ground up. This opened the door for students to develop skills as research-practitioners, engage in on-going research and faculty collaborations, and establish scholarly bonds that have transcended a semester class.

In designing course syllabi, instructors have to be cognizant to delineate precise learning objectives relevant to professional standards. Traditional didactic-based classroom environments allow instructors to efficiently disseminate professional knowledge, yet rich learning occurs when students are provided with opportunities to manipulate professional knowledge in conditions approximate to the real world. The authors do not advocate for the displacement of traditional techniques; their intent was to refresh the literature on a valuable pedagogical tool, ideal for applying formalized learning and amenable to a variety of classroom settings. In this case, the setting was a doctoral class; as such, the project was designed to engender a challenging educational environment. However, less exhaustive projects could be easily introduced in master's level classes to augment pre-practicum learning experiences.

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