Teaching Group Counseling as a Graduate Student: What Works and What We Will Never Do Again!

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As graduate students, the opportunity to teach one of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) core courses is an honor. Being selected for this opportunity means that professors have confidence in your ability to successfully impart information and influence student learning. At the same time, the challenges associated with this experience can evoke extreme anxiety! Using our experiences as instructors for a masters level group counseling class as an example, the authors highlight common obstacles faced by doctoral students who teach counseling courses. In response to these challenges, we provide examples of teaching strategies that we found to be successful and others that were not so successful, in other words, the things we will never do again!

Common Challenges

As graduate students who also served as instructors, we continually found ourselves negotiating dilemmas regarding dual and power relationships, process vs. content, theory vs. skills training, and academic freedom vs. departmental and CACREP expectations.

Power and roles

Carleton and Strand (1991) refer to the unique challenge of the teaching doctoral student as a "see-saw dilemma" (p.20), that of student and instructor and the balancing of these two often conflicting roles. Power structure may be especially perplexing for doctoral students teaching in a counseling program. That is, counseling programs, because of the humanistic foundation of counseling, may be more inclined towards an egalitarian model of instruction compared to other fields. Furthermore, the fact that group counseling is a content and skills based course, often taught with experiential techniques, may further confound power dimensions. In other words, experiential learning in a group course invites more active participation by all students and the instructor than a traditional lecture format. In the case of teaching group counseling, the roles and power bases within a "group" are not exactly the same as the roles and power bases within a "class."

In our case, we were teaching masters level students in the same department in which we are doctoral students. We experienced both parties being unclear about whether or not to interact as if in a peer relationship or as if in a relationship that delineates a more traditional instructional power structure. On one hand, students perceiving us in a peer role allowed for a uniquely supportive group or class environment that may have been devoid of the student apprehension that can be present with a faculty instructor. On the other hand, students perceiving us in a peer role meant that we sometimes did not receive the same deference as faculty and that power challenges created tension in the group or

class environment.

For example, challenges to our evaluative power as doctoral students occurred when students questioned the purpose of assignments, how class time was spent, and the grading or the format of the class. In some cases, students may have perceived us more as peers, being more candid with their comments and feedback than perhaps they would be with faculty. Since we consider student feedback to be critically important, anticipating students' comments produced high levels of anxiety for us. With so many hours of hard work invested in teaching a course, a negative student evaluation can be a crushing blow for a counselor educator in training. Although we received very favorable evaluations overall, the few negative comments from students seemed to weigh most heavily in our minds. The other side of evaluative power involves grading student performance, which is often unfamiliar territory that elicits mixed emotions. On one hand, providing encouragement and positive feedback as students learn and grow and can be an exhilarating experience. On the other hand, gatekeeping, or making sure that counselor trainees meet a minimal level of competence, is part of the role of a counselor educator. It can be difficult to put on the "instructor hat" and give students feedback that their performance is not meeting the standards of the profession.

Another way in which the confusion about power and roles was often evidenced was that masters students wondered what title or name they should call us by; first name, last name; as "Mrs." or "Ms."; as "Dr." or "Instructor?" All three of us gave students permission to call us by our first names, which may have engendered students to view us as having less or different power than faculty and therefore to perceive us in a peer role. We continue to reflect upon this choice and its potentially beneficial and/or detrimental consequences specific to teaching group counseling as doctoral students.

Balancing Process vs. Content

In order for groups to function effectively, the need for both process and content has been strongly endorsed by experts in the field of group work (Krause & Hulse-Killacky, 1996; Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, & Donigian, 2001). Process and content are two powerful forces within a group that have significant influence on a group's development and productivity (Gladding, 2003). Content refers to what is being said, the actual exchange of information, or ideas, as well as the purpose of the group. Process refers to the interaction between group members and the group leader. For example, one member may not feel that she is able to share her thoughts in the group for fear of criticism by other group members. Her lack of participation may be influenced by her overall sense of safety. Regardless, her silence impacts the entire group. Similar to counseling groups, we felt it was important to attempt a balance of content and process in our classrooms.

Balancing Theory and Skills Training

CACREP provides standards for the teaching of effective group principles, dynamics,

theories, skills, and ethics (CACREP, 2001). Maintaining the proper balance between theory and skills training was key, but at times proved to be a challenge. We found ourselves grappling with several dilemmas: *How much of the CACREP learning objectives do we cover and still find time to model group skills and point out group process? How much lecture was enough? How often should we role play? How often should we engage in discussions about our own concurrent group processes? Students were gaining group experience in the experiential component, but were they getting enough? Should we provide more?* These were just a few of the many questions/dilemmas we grappled with.

Academic Freedom

Along with process and content is the issue of academic freedom. We negotiated our role as instructors of master's level students with the ever present knowledge that we were, in fact, students ourselves. As graduate student instructors, we were on one hand, responsible for facilitating and supervising the learning of others, yet we were also under supervision. We were granted creative license in the structure of our syllabi, delivery methods, and implementation of exercises, yet there were times in which we required, and even sought out, frequent check-ins with faculty mentors and one another.

Beyond daily instructional tasks, we sometimes faced important decisions regarding course structure and effective and intentional teaching strategies. Many of the decisions we made were worked through individually and collectively (with frequent visits to Starbucks ©), while major decisions involving departmental policies (e.g., attendance requirements, retention and support plans) required extended conversations and support from our faculty mentors.

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Teaching Strategies that Worked

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In response to the challenges described above, we tried numerous different instructional strategies. Integrating the discussion of cultural issues into every class meeting was tremendously important, as was the role of peer support. As we outline some of the more effective interventions that we tried, we wish to emphasize that these strategies may be useful in teaching most counseling skills courses, not just group counseling.

Integrating Multicultural Competencies

Ethical guidelines in counseling (ACA, 2005) and group work (ASGW, 1991) demand that counselors possess empathy and continually seek to understand and honor the different qualities of the individuals and groups that they serve. The first step in understanding and honoring others, however, is the development of full awareness and realization of one's self as cultural beings. As group instructors, we emphasized this concept of awareness by engaging our students in discussions surrounding the importance of group leaders understanding themselves as cultural beings and how such

understandings encourage effective group work. Just as there is an ethical imperative that counselor-trainees become aware of how their values, attitudes and beliefs impact their work with clients, we considered it ethically imperative that our students learn the complex multicultural context of group process.

In addition, we were aware that multicultural issues are present in every group. The classroom is essentially a large group (Hulse-Killacky, 1996). Similar to counseling groups, each individual walks into the classroom with a different set of backgrounds, experiences, personality styles, and learning patterns. In each of our classes, we encountered students who had vastly different life experiences from our own. As the semester went on and as developmental group stages unfolded, a unique classroom micro-culture evolved. And with that transformation, we discovered how knowledge and awareness of multicultural competencies could be useful in guiding our teaching goals and methods.

The Value of Peer Support

Low self-efficacy and poor perceptions of competence are common for doctoral student who are instructors and for teaching assistants (Lambert & Tice, 1993); therefore, support is needed for this group. We found peer support to be tremendously helpful and met regularly throughout the semester and afterwards as well. Initially we met to discuss the administrative aspects of teaching the course; lesson planning, PowerPoint sharing, grading, strategies for delivering content. Although we acknowledged our unique teaching styles and ultimately used different strategies in each of the sections we taught, we used our meeting time to generate ideas and to discuss the results of the various methods we had tried.

As the semester progressed, we talked less about the administrative issues and focused more on dealing with classroom dynamics and instructional issues. We seemed to struggle simultaneously with finding the right balance between content instruction and experiential teaching so that students could pass their comprehensive exams and acquire the skills to become competent practitioners. Our peer support time shifted from that of mostly idea generating and validating information to that of focusing on student issues and validating each other's instructional approaches.

By the end of the semester, our peer support time had reached new depths. We each had unique experiences in teaching the group course but we were more aware of our common development as counselor educators. We arrived at many of the same conclusions about how we would teach the course differently next time and about what kind of learning experiences were most valuable for students. Our conversation shifted once more, then to a focus on our personal growth as a result of teaching the course. We recognized the value of meeting together and the tremendous support we provided one another in grappling with the student-instructor role. Our students expressed greater interest in the experiential aspects of the class that came later in the semester and simultaneously

through our peer support we spent more time discussion the experiential aspects of teaching. As a result, in the end, we noted the parallel process between our own development through our peer support and that of the group classes we taught.

Modeling

Hulse-Killacky et al. (2001) writes about the need for balancing process and content in order for groups to function effectively. As group workers and instructors, we believe that it is through the interaction of group members that change occurs. Therefore, it was important for us to encourage student-to-student interactions early on. One way of doing that involved modeling, and students were encouraged to practice these skills in class. We began every class with a round to check in with students and model how to use rounds as a group facilitator. In addition, we had students sit in a circle, just as group members would. We sat in the circle too and lead class sessions as a group facilitator. Another example of a technique we modeled was *scanning* , the technique of continuously observing the whole group even as one student responded to a statement made by the instructor or another student. Through scanning, students were then forced/encouraged to address each student directly. This exercise not only increased student-to-student interactions, which led to less dependency on the instructor for all aspects of learning; but it also enhanced overall class cohesiveness. In addition to scanning, other group techniques such as *drawing out* and *cutting off* were frequently simulated (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). We found that modeling various skills was a useful teaching tool in effectively demonstrating group interventions.

Experiential Exercises

In addressing the balance between theory and skills training we found it most useful to emphasize skill development in the didactic portion of the course. While critical to the group work trainees' development, many of the group theoretical concepts could be acquired from the lecture notes, which were given to students but not necessarily reviewed in class, and outside readings. To focus on skill development, we viewed our class as a group and designed experiential learning activities based on the developmental stage of our class. In the forming stage we utilized introductory ice-breaker activities to help increase the sense of safety in the room and build cohesiveness (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). As the group progressed into more advanced levels of development we utilized activities such as having class members act out typical group member roles such as the monopolist, the silent member, or the help-rejecting complainer (Yalom, 1995) while other group members played the role of group facilitator. Another activity that proved to be effective was asking the class to reflect upon the stage of group development that our class was in currently. The use of experiential activities provided much more powerful examples of group interventions and group development than a text book or lecture could offer.

What We Would Never Do Again!

PowerPoint

Although a brilliant invention and an efficient way of disseminating large amounts of information, PowerPoint can also be used as a crutch. We found our utilization of Power Point to be inhibiting and ineffective at creating the type of personalized group format we desired. With limited use, Power Point can be effective when displaying pictures, photos, and complex diagrams. However, for our purposes, we discovered that Power Point was often an unnecessary distancing tool in the teaching of group work that can impede student-to-instructor, and student-to-student engagement.

Extensive lecturing

A number of studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of lectures. Unfortunately for lecture lovers, the results are discouraging (McKeachie, 2002). Unfortunately for us, we forgot about these studies! Current literature informs educators us that discussion methods are far more superior to lectures, particularly in regards to retention and transference of knowledge. Likewise, our experiences informed us that small and large group discussions appear to suit the highly experiential nature of group work training. Similar to PowerPoint, an over reliance on lectures can lead to a teacher-centered and student-passive mode of instruction (Creed, 1997). Such an over reliance runs counter to our goal of student-to-student-to-instructor interaction, as well as attention to group process.

Over preparation

Yalom (1995) states that the more structured exercises a group facilitator uses, the more competent group members perceive the leader to be at the end of the group experience; however, the amount of structured exercises used by a group leader is negatively correlated with positive client outcomes six months after the group's termination. From our experience, the same principal applies to teaching a group counseling course. We began the semester by constructing a detailed lesson plan; every minute of the class sessions were planned in advance. Using this approach, students undoubtedly would describe us as well prepared. However, we soon realized that students were missing the richness of the group process. We were being incongruent by asking students to focus on the here and now and take risks as group members and facilitators while being unwilling to take risks ourselves. As the semester progressed we utilized a more flexible approach. We began to trust our class to add to discussions and experiential activities. Approaching instruction in a more flexible, spontaneous manner certainly leaves more room for error and we believe, more opportunity for student growth.

As future counselor educators, the trials and tribulations we encountered as instructors for a group counseling course are of immeasurable value. Although we learned some lessons

the hard way, we grew tremendously as a result of our experiences. We hope that our stories are of benefit to other doctoral students and the students they instruct.

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