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Improve Your Teaching: Learn to Fly, or Sing, or Build Cars

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Dr. Jorgensen worked 20 years in private practice, hospital and community counseling agencies before joining St. Cloud State University faculty in 2000. Her interest in adult learning, legislative and counseling outcomes grew from her experiences in the field.

Counselor Educators are called for the most important work of educating and mentoring the next generation of counseling professionals. Higher education professionals have curriculum improvement courses, accreditation requirements, technology upgrades and multiple seminars on teaching and learning strategies. Each of these opportunities contributes to improved teaching in counselor education. What can we do to become even better at our work as counselor educators?

One of the best teaching improvement experiences I have had is learning to fly. This experience of being a learner in a completely new field taught me important lessons for working with students entering the field of counseling and increased my understanding of self concept in the learning process. As a result I have one other suggestion for improving your courses – take the opportunity to put yourself into a completely new learning environment, exploring the experience and learning curve with the content as well as the challenges to self concept.

I entered aviation training full of enthusiasm, energy and curiosity, and then met with concepts, vocabulary, perspectives on the procedures and training that seemed alien and confusing. A big challenge was to my competency. I wondered what are the variations, what are the concrete facts, can I do this?

I couldn't help but reflect on my experience working with students entering the field who confuse psychology and counseling, master's degrees, licensure, related fields, and then become discouraged or self doubting. Understanding counseling history and mission, the consistency and variability that exists in a developing field seems simple to someone who has been in the field for years but can be daunting for students who come from a multitude of programs and previous instructor perspectives. I listen with different ears now as instructors who have taught a course for multiple years complain that students just don't seem to get the concepts or memory items for the course. I wonder how expectations for an instructor who has reviewed, taught, read and studied material for a course for a lifetime can coincide with a new learner who hasn't had years repetition of the same material or years of history in the field.

Entering a new field, in my case, aviation, can be similar to entering a new culture. The language, customs, communication, role expectations and history are

important to know and sometimes hard to learn without conscious attention. As aviation instructors and other students would toss around shortcuts and phrases, I paid attention. I studied the textbooks and reading material though much of the understanding wasn't in the textbooks. I knew there was another learning that could only be managed by interacting with persons who had been in aviation and having the experience to bring the learning to life.

From my experience in having aviation concepts explained without actually flying the plane, I understand the importance of practicing scenarios to explain the concepts and context. From a self concept perspective, I understand the importance of patience with new learners who confuse licensure and certification, statistical concepts, and publication writing guides. I am careful to show patience (well most of the time) with students who ask the same question again and again, understanding that the learning is developmental, built on experience and context, not an independent experience. I understand with new depth that not remembering the difference between national certification and state licensure indicates not just a confusion of NBCC and LPCC, but a larger scaffold of knowledge about the field. In building skills, micro skills for example, the importance of not only explaining but demonstrating, providing feedback, listening to responses before adding additional information. I remembered an adult learning concept of unlearning when a first instructor trained me for an unorthodox landing procedure that took many lessons to unlearn; that unlearning a skill then learning a new one is much harder than simply learning a new skill. My patience and listening skill improved in the classroom.

The Community Counseling (soon Mental Health Counseling) department at St. Cloud State University is working to improve the integration of courses, providing repetition throughout the two-year program in introducing concepts, building understanding and reinforcing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will provide continuity of learning as opposed to independent learning experience. My enthusiasm for the integration is fueled by my experience of being a new learner in another field.

In my aviation training, I worked with different instructors. Each flight instructor (seven in all) had slightly different ideas about professional competency, standards, and teaching. This was challenging in meeting the expectations of the instructors, especially when the expectations seemed at odds with other instructors. I thought often of dissertation students' confusion with conflicting recommendations and practicum students valiantly trying to incorporate teaching from one instructor in a course with another instructor offering a different perspective.

I found the professional publications a great asset in understanding the standards and challenges of the field, which provided continuity when variations in teaching styles and even procedures instruction varied from instructor to instructor. I read flight magazines and noted that there were many perspectives and discussions about the variations I noted. My interest in studying how counseling is presented in professional and trade publications changed. The importance of materials which show a consistency provide a base for professionals, new and experienced, to describe and discuss emergent and challenging issues. Looking at conference presentations, divisions, and journal articles provides a view of the field which is broader than following the perspective of the professors in the counseling program.

My experience was significant, enough to recommend to all of you who are wondering about how students cannot understand what you are trying to explain, to those

of you who want to improve your teaching, to those of you who want some fun. Go flying, take karate, learn to ski, try singing, any dream you have had that will put you on the novice level. Improve your counselor education instruction; become a novice.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm