

Educating Counselors: A Constructivist Approach to the Development of Core Counseling Skills

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Abstract

The constructivist approach to learning was effective in the development of counseling skills in graduate students (N=39; 31 female, 8 male) over three semesters in an Introduction to Counseling course at a small private liberal arts university in the Northeast. The constructivist strategies included: role-play experiences, videotaped counseling sessions, small cooperative learning groups, and professor and peer interaction and feedback regarding the development of empathic counselor responses. The two rating forms used to measure counseling skills were the Counselor Skills and Personal Development-Rating Form (CSPD-RF; Torres-Rivera, et al. 2002) and the Counselor Response Rating Form (CRRF; Unpublished counseling scenarios), which was scored by the Basic Counselor Response Rating Scale (BCRRS; Bogner, 2005). All measures of growth were at a significance level of $p < .05$ and (Cohen's-d) effect sizes indicated moderate growth in counseling skill development.

This article presents a constructivist approach to evaluate and encourage an increased level of empathy presented by graduate students during active learning components of a class designed to develop counseling skills. The goal of the class was to present a constructivist multilayered feedback learning environment by providing a variety of experiences that allowed the students to act as a counselor interacting with a client and then self-evaluate on their performance. The experiential elements were designed for the counselor trainee to build upon their own life experiences and grow as a counselor. This was perceived as a movement from a more cognitive interaction (advice-giving) to one that is more empathic (feeling statements). It is generally acknowledged that counselors need to have skills that reflect empathy as a necessary component in practice and in training (Corey, 1996; Ivey, Ivey, and Simon-Morgan, 1997). Corey imparts

...a therapist's tasks are to help clients discover their own solutions and recognize their own freedom to act, not to deprive them of the opportunity to act freely. A common escape by many clients is not trusting themselves to find solutions, use their freedom, or discover their own direction. Even if we, as therapists, were able to resolve their struggles for them, we would be fostering their dependence on us. They would continually need to seek our counsel for every new twist in their difficulties. Our job is to help them independently make choices and have the courage to accept the consequences of their choices. Giving advice (as a style) does not work toward this end (p. 41).

This does not prohibit advice as an appropriate technique; however, it should not be the primary intervention used in counseling. The mark of a well trained counselor is the judicious use of advice giving in general. Corey (1996) further states “My caution is against overusing the technique of giving information and advice as the main diet of counseling. Far too many inexperienced counselors fall into the trap of believing that they are not doing their job unless they are being prescriptive in meeting the clients’ apparent demands for advice” (p. 42). Counselor training should focus on building skills that are not based solely on advise-giving, which can be accomplished through various experiential activities.

Constructivist Perspective in Counselor Training

Constructivism in education is a multifaceted method of learning that emphasizes the past experiences of the learner as well as their ability to integrate new information and adapt it at deeper levels of processing and application. This approach is utilized at all levels of education and training; when applied to graduate counselor training the constructivist approach builds upon the abilities that the counselor trainee currently possesses. This foundation has its origins in Vygotsky’s theory of zone of proximal development (three levels; low, mid, and high) and scaffolding; where the student receives instruction from a professor as an expert, building upon the aptitude of the individual to learn new concepts, in preparation for and in counseling sessions (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001). The ultimate goal is to build upon the natural abilities of the student; to help them become more competent and draw on the microskills necessary to be an effective counselor.

Foote, Vermette, and Battaglia (2001) provided a rationale for the constructivist perspective in education, “Constructivism is a theory of learning, and not, in itself, a theory of teaching” (p. 3). The focus therefore is to provide the opportunity to learn, rather than attempt to coach various concepts. This is accomplished through multilayered format in the learning process and adapting personal schemas with new information. “Constructivist theory views learning not as sequential and linear, but integrated and complex” (Foote, et al. p. 24), and as counseling relationships are also a complex interaction, it is logical to use this approach to the training of counselors. Moreover, constructivism from a counselor perspective has been defined by Gladding (2006) as “A philosophy that proposes that reality is subjective in nature, a *reflection* of observation, not an *objective* entity” (p. 35).

The indication of skills in counselor trainees is evidenced in part upon the principles of cognitive development developed by Piaget as described in the method of adaptation (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2007). When an individual’s personal scheme is challenged, the new information must be understood and assimilated into a new scheme. This is best accomplished when the “new information becomes intimately connected with experience and prior knowledge” (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001, p. 17). Assimilation occurs when the new information is incorporated into a new scheme and this is accomplished through accommodation, where an existing scheme can then be modified to fit the new information; adaptation is then successful and learning has occurred (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2007). Subsequently, this should be the focus of counselor training, the assimilation and accommodation of the skills needed in a counselor, which can be achieved through the presentation of the new information that has been outside the level of knowing (low, mid, and high) as evidenced by the zone of proximal development.

The role of the professor as suggested by Dewey is a teacher who’s role is facilitator and the classroom is the vehicle used to “provide a means for connecting learning with personal experience” (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001, p. 15). The demonstration of higher level of practice of counseling is facilitated by a professor through experiential activities such as counseling session role-plays, self-evaluation of the experience, and feedback from other participants, providing an environment where adaptation can occur. Role-plays are simulated demonstrations of real life counseling scenarios and as such allow the opportunity for authentic interactions and as “active participants in our own lives” (Mahoney, 2003, p. 5); which models the underlying psychotherapeutic intent of counseling sessions. The rehearsal of a counseling session can then be utilized initially for general skills training such as listening and attending, and as these skills are mastered, continuing with more complex microskills that are necessary in an effective counselor. This multilayered platform for constructivist feedback and of classroom management, where facilitator and participants provide differing views of the learning experience, allow for the integration of new knowledge. This then results in the improvement in the level of proficiency of students as posited by this study; which is the move from a cognitive to an empathic working alliance.

McLeod (1999) presented a narrative social constructivist perspective of therapeutic empathy which attempted to coherently represent a theoretical approach to integrate both clinical and research application. This resulted in a six stage model of constructing moments of empathic understanding in counseling. The model is based on the premise that the relationship and use of empathy is socially constructed, but through both the counselor and the client behaviors. Of note, McLeod relays in the model that empathic understanding can take three forms; reflection, interpretation, and exploration from previously accepted uses and attempts at empathic understanding.

Based on a cultural and historical, empathy is a term that has been increasingly used more since the 20th century and is a “word that is used in situations in which the capacity of one person to understand the feelings and experience of another has become problematic” (McLeod, 1999, p. 389). As such there are more traditional cultures that might not have value for the term empathy. It is important to remember that there are a myriad of views of counseling, including multicultural counseling perspectives, and it has been suggested that constructivism may be a particularly valuable approach as it takes into primary consideration the view from the client’s perspective (Tatar & Bekerman, 2002). Since the basis for counseling is to understand the client’s worldview, this can be accomplished through a constructivist methodology, as it can literally help the counselor assimilate the new learning and adapts it into their own worldview schema. However, due to the varied cultures that can be expected to be a factor in working with a client, counselors can integrate the notion that “achievement of an empathic connectedness should no longer be seen as the sole responsibility of the therapist” (McLeod, p. 391) and that, in fact, the client should have equal effect on the process. Yet, for this to be successful in the therapeutic relationship, a counselor must first be trained in the methods for establishing a strong therapeutic alliance, which includes embracing a more empathic style of interaction. This can help establish trust between the counselor and client.

Core Conditions

Roger’s (1989) Person-Centered Therapy provided the basis for the necessary and sufficient conditions for change to occur which he called Core Conditions. Three of the six core conditions most frequently referred to in literature are empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Tudor & Merry, 2002; Seligman, 2009; Watts, 1998). Gladding (2006) defines empathy as, “The *counselor’s* ability to see, be aware of, conceptualize, understand, and effectively communicate back to a *client* the client’s *feelings, thoughts and* frame of reference in regard to a *situation* or point of view” (p. 51). Empathic understanding is a “term used synonymously with EMPATHY and generally more often used by Rogers in his writings on the subject; it carries the connotation that empathy is (only) a cognitive process...” (Tudor & Merry, 2002, p. 46). Meier and Davis (2005) further define empathy as:

Some beginning counselors interpret empathy to mean agreement or sympathy. Empathy refers to a deeper comprehension of the subjective world of clients (*sic*). Agreement suggests that the counselor approves of the client’s behavior, and sympathy indicates that the counselor feels sorry for the client (p. 37).

Congruence can best be understood as “1. A consistency between the way people feel and the way they act. 2. A key concept, also known as *genuineness*, in the theory of Carl Rogers” (Gladding, 2006, p. 35) or as a “therapeutic attitude of genuineness or wholeness” (Tudor & Merry, 2002, p. 29). While unconditional positive regard can be best described as “Total acceptance of the experiences of a *client* without conditions; a nonpossessive caring and acceptance” (Gladding, p. 146); this should be a “consistent ACCEPTANCE of each aspect of a person’s experience” (Tudor & Merry, p. 146). Unconditional positive regard should not be confused with gratuitous friendliness or niceness (Tudor & Merry).

The counselor’s ability to empathize with their client allows for a subjective experience in the counseling session and empowers the client to resolve their problems. Klimes (1992) illustrates the importance of facilitating client change, rather than advice-giving. The significance of facilitating clients’ understanding of their problems enables them to overcome problems over their lifetime; as exemplified in the old adage “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime” (Klimes). Facilitating client change through the use of empathy not only empowers the client, but also helps to initiate a strong therapeutic alliance. Cognitive theories work under the assumption that the counselor is the one running the session and giving directives; however, research has indicated that employing directives can leave some clients feeling threatened and therefore become resistant to change (Corey, 1996; MacDougall, 2002).

Active listening skills and empathy are crucial components of the counseling relationship. Students in counseling education programs may be apt to give advice to clients, not realizing that this may create an invisible wall between themselves and the client. Notarius and Herrick (1988) discovered in the comparisons between students utilizing advice-giving and active listening skills during mock counseling sessions, those acting as distressed clients became increasingly depressed and rejected when counselors employed advice-giving. Other research on advice giving versus active listening with vocational/educational counselors, conclude that clients working with counselors who employ active listening (empathy) and verbal reinforcement leave the session feeling empowered to make their own decisions (Samaan, 1971).

Some may conclude that empathy is not learned; rather it is a personality trait. Therefore it has been argued that a student can not be trained to make use of empathy in the counseling process. Lyons and Hazler (2002) examined differences in empathy development between 1st and 2nd year students in a master's level counseling program. Students in their 2nd year of the program demonstrated increased levels of empathy greater than those in their 1st year of training (Lyons & Hazler). Other researchers have been able to validate the use of empathy skills training through the use of role-playing and video-taped sessions (Anderson et al., 1989). Student participants at the graduate level were trained to employ empathy when assuming the role of counselor. Students playing the role of the client, felt significantly more understood and comfortable with the counseling process, when the student portraying the counselor illustrated empathy towards him/her. This demonstrates that those students participating in empathy training were not only able to learn empathy, but also increase the therapeutic alliance (Anderson, et al.).

Although the trend in the field of counseling has geared itself towards training students to employ cognitive techniques, empathy is an important force in creating a working alliance with a client (Corey, 1996; Miller, 1989). Giving directives such as advice may set up a barricade in the counselor/client relationship. Nevertheless, it is important to train students participating in counseling programs to employ empathy more consistently than directives. Therefore, one viable method that can be utilized to accomplish these ends is the constructivist approach in the training of counselors which includes such activities as role-plays, responding to counseling scenarios, and evaluation of performances.

Self-Evaluation

The evaluation or rating of one's skills in an attempt to assess performance in an experiential component in training can be, at some level, biased. This potential bias is based on the underlying nature of self reports, that they are inherently challenging due to the fact that participation in activities like in role-plays are by the very nature of our interaction skewed to the partakers own life experiences. Moreover, there may be the potential for distortions due to social desirability bias, the tendency to give socially approved answers or distortions rooted in a response set, the tendency to respond to questions in a particular way (Weiten, 2008).

Fuqua, Johnson, et al. (1984) examined the relationship between self, peer, and supervisor ratings in graduate level counselor training. Students were video taped during 20 minute simulations (counseling sessions) twice during the semester (2nd and 14th week) producing pre- and post-training ratings, resulting in significant relationships between peer and supervisor ratings. Interestingly, self ratings were not significantly correlated with the other two raters; while peer ratings were significantly higher than any other ratings which may connote that the camaraderie among peers may bias their evaluation of each other. Fuqua, Johnson, et al. suggested that future research on this topic would be helpful to consider carefully who is selected for performance ratings and evaluation, which was subsequently done.

Fuqua, Newman, et al. (1984) re-examined whether there were significant differences between ratings of self, peers, and supervisors. In this study 33 graduate students who were split into groups (of 3-5); each group had a doctoral level instructor, running two hour training sessions, followed by 20 minute video taped simulated counseling sessions. Both peers and supervisors were asked to observe videos of counseling simulations, and then peers, supervisors, and counselors were asked to complete the seven measures of counseling performance. The peer and self (counselor) ratings were not significantly different, but the supervisor to both peer and self ratings were significantly different. Fuqua, Newman, et al. confirmed the importance of the rating source, as well as the importance of inter-rater reliability.

Purpose

This study attempted to utilize the constructivist approach in the training of graduate level counselor students, through various experiential methods; including, responding to preset scenarios, role plays of both student dyads and student and actor dyads, student self-evaluation of taped counseling sessions, and weekly written feedback activities with subsequent class discussions. Change was measured by the counselor trainee behavior as movement from a cognitive to an empathic response to the client which indicated a higher level functioning of the counselor trainee.

Methodology

Participants

Counselor trainees: Graduate students (N= 39; 31 female, 8 male) over three semesters, enrolled primarily in School Counseling and Mental Health Counseling programs at a small private liberal arts university in the Northeast. The intention was to introduce counseling skills to graduate students taking part in an Introduction to Counseling class (ranged from 10-16 students) that comprised an experiential component. Clients: Undergraduate students (range of 5-10 a semester) at a small private liberal arts university in the Northeast from the Theater department volunteered to act as clients. They were asked to read over a problem scenario and present the problem to the counselor as actor client. Both counselors and clients were informed and consented that these sessions would be video-recorded.

Measures

Counselor Skill and Personal Development (CSPD-RF; Torres-Rivera et al., 2002). The CSPD-RF was “developed by Wilbur (sic) to evaluate the counseling skills of counselors-in-training during structured group supervision” (Torres-Rivera et al., p. 268). Comprised of 20 items that are scored on a 6 point Likert scale, where 1 is unacceptable through 6 which is outstanding, each rating was based on the counseling skills observed. The internal consistency had an alpha .91, and a split-half reliability of .83 and .84.

Counselor Response Rating Form (CRRF; unpublished scenarios). The CRRF was comprised of five client comments that presented a counseling problem that represented general issues from a typical initial interview. The central issues were betrayal, grief, relocation, drinking and fighting, and academics. Each was rated on the *Basic Counselor Response Rating Scale* (BCRRS; Bogner, 2005) of 1 to 5; 1=Advice Giving, 2=Closed Question, 3=Open Question, 4=Reflecting Content; and 5=Reflecting Feeling. The ratings were defined by the overall theme of each response and were defined as follows: Advice Giving was defined as a suggestion or recommendation; Closed Question was defined as a question that can be answered with a single response or only a few words; Open Question was defined as a question that required a more in depth response that required an exploration into the self; Reflecting Content was defined as responding to verbal and non-verbal behaviors the client presented; and Reflecting Feeling was defined as responding to the verbal and non-verbal emotional aspects the client presented (Gladding, 2006).

Procedures

Counseling skills were practiced through videotaped role plays throughout the semester and students self-evaluated their performance for at least the initial and final sessions (range of sessions 5-9). Additionally, students wrote a response to a pre and post measure of scenarios presenting five different client problems at an initial interview. The professor assigned the students into groups, so that each of the groups was comprised of differing types and levels of experience. The ages of the students ranged from 22 to 66.

The role played counseling sessions were performed by either student dyads or by student and actor dyads with problem scenarios that were provided by the professor. Selected videotaped counseling sessions (student and actor dyads) were viewed in class and discussed. At the end of the taping sessions each group provided verbal feedback to each other and written anonymous comments on 3 by 5 cards regarding positive and negative observations of counselor responses. After the cards were completed they were then compiled by the class into either “Positive Observations” or “Negative Observations” and then distributed the following week to the entire class. The characteristics of the counselors’ responses to clients’ statements were explored, which led to clarification of what constituted appropriate and effective reactions. Similarly, ineffective counselor responses were identified and improved upon by the students and professor. This process led to an understanding of what contributes to the development of core conditions and the empathic therapeutic relationship.

The students' observation skills were improved and they achieved higher levels of cognitive skills (analysis and synthesis) according to Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive thinking. At the end of each class each member of the dyad completed a feedback form, which encouraged participants to reflect on the quality of their experiences as the client or counselor. The feedback form focused on what factors contributed to client change and how the counselor could improve skills in responding more empathically. In addition, the students were instructed to share their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their experience during the counseling session. At subsequent classes a composite list of all client and counselor comments was distributed and discussed. The comments were anonymous and enabled counselor trainees to recognize feelings of self efficacy, growth in skill development and additional appropriate types of counselor behaviors. In addition, each counselor trainee received the feedback form from the actor client as well as their own feedback form. Consequently the counselor feedback forms functioned as a journal for the counselor trainee.

The aforementioned class procedures provided the opportunity to distinguish between behaviors, such as advice giving, which initially may have been viewed as positive by students, but through class discussion came to be seen as negative in most circumstances. The counselor trainees learned that counselor responses that reflected feelings were more productive for the clients. All of the forms of feedback and discussions were geared toward facilitating the development of counseling skills that would increase the therapeutic alliance, thereby increasing client change and growth. The constructivist nature of the experiential activities enabled counselor trainees to construct new knowledge and acknowledge the role of experience in the process of learning.

The CSPR-RF was administered after a deeper understanding of counseling techniques was effectively demonstrated by the student. The students evaluated their responses to their initial and final videotaped session with a client actor using the CSPR-RF. Five of the 20 items were of interest to the researchers because they measure skills related to the development of the core conditions for a therapeutic alliance. At the end of the semester the students identified the change in their responses to clients on all items on the instrument. The CRRF presented problems for five client scenarios and required written responses by the counselor trainees. The CRRF was administered at the first and last class of the semester. The written responses were used by the professor to evaluate the progress of individual students. A comparison of pre and post administration of the measure provided the professor with a means to evaluate the progress of students in their ability to respond to clients with more empathy and less advice.

Results

The CRRF was rated using the BCRRS by the first three authors. The inter-rater reliability of the BCRRS was established through 30 correlations of the CRRF five scenarios with a Pearson correlation two-tailed test of significance which ranged from .382 to .947 ($p < .01$; $p < .05$ for a single item). Of the 30 correlations, 12 were mild to moderate (.382-.654) and 18 were strong (.700-.947). The mean scores of the CRRF questions at the initial sessions and the final sessions demonstrated positive change or growth of the students with a paired samples two-tailed t-test at a significance level of $p < .001$ for questions 1, 2, 4, and 5, and $p < .01$ for question 3. The Cohen's-d effect sizes for the five items on the CRRF respectively were 1=.91, 2=.89, 4=.94, 5=.71, and 3=.65, which indicates a strong relationship between the changes in growth of the counselor trainee in the movement from the giving advice to reflecting client feelings. This then verified a more empathic response to the client problem by the counselor trainee.

The mean scores of the CSPD-RF questions at the initial sessions and the final sessions demonstrated positive change or growth of the students with a paired samples two-tailed t-test at a significance level of $p < .001$ for the five items of interest to the researchers. The five items (4, 5, 6, 7, and 17) measured responses linked to core conditions of a therapeutic alliance, such as: empathy, congruence, and reflection of meaning and feelings. The effect sizes as calculated using Cohen's-d ranged from .64 to .94. The effect sizes for items 4, 5, 6, 7, and 17 are as follows respectively: .90, .90, .94, .64, and .86. On this scale students' average growth in counseling skills ranged from slightly under two-thirds of a standard deviation to almost a full standard deviation from the initial measurements.

Discussion

Growth in counseling skills was evident as measured by the BCRRS. The researchers consistently measured higher level functioning of the counselor as indicated by the decrease in the advice giving (cognitive and directive) responses and the increase in the empathic responses to the clients' initial statements of their problems.

Roger's Core Conditions were the basis for the training and over time from the beginning to the end of the semester the change in counselor trainee responses moved away from advice-giving to an emotional connection. The findings of this study indicated that this growth in providing empathic responses to the client indicated a higher level of counselor effectiveness in developing a therapeutic alliance with clients. As a result, positive client growth would be more likely.

The results of five items on the CSPD-RF, the self assessment instrument, indicated moderate growth in the critical foundation skills of the counselor trainees. At the end of the semester long course students had learned to identify counselor skills in paraphrasing, summarizing, empathy, reflecting meaning, reflecting feelings and congruence between verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Consequently, the students were then able to self assess these skills at two points in time and growth in their counseling skills became evident.

The constructivist perspective of learning was utilized in counselor training and as a result growth in skills was indicated by the aforementioned assessment tools. Counselor trainees responded to counseling situations, self-reported and evaluated their counseling skills based on the counseling sessions they had participated in throughout the semester. The small cooperative learning groups designed by the professor provided a safe, non-threatening environment for informative feedback on counselor behaviors. The weekly reflections on the feedback forms and the compiled list of observed counselor behaviors added to the constructivist experiences. A limitation might be the initial level of understanding and skills that are presented by students at the beginning of the semester. Students may present differing abilities as demonstrated by the individual's zone of proximal development, ranging from low to high. These differing levels may have an influence on the level of attainment throughout the semester. However, this should not be considered an impediment to growth rather it provided an opportunity to continue developing the skills that are necessary for the unique challenges that are presented in school and mental health counseling. The students with higher initial skills were frequently able to model effective counseling responses, which enhanced the learning environment for their peers.

One recommendation might be to replicate this study using the constructivist approach in the methodology in another introductory counseling class and measure the growth using the Basic Counselor Response Rating Scale. This can provide two outcomes, it can contribute to the reliability of the Basic Counselor Response Rating Scale and it can emphasize the importance of counselor empathy in counseling sessions. One other variation might be to apply the basis of this study to a more advanced counseling class.

Conclusions

A classroom climate of discovery, active student engagement with the professor and peers, and an emphasis on learning through opportunities to construct knowledge by creating authentic role play experiences contributed to the growth in counseling skills. The two measures (CSPR-RF and BCRRS) provided evidence for the use of the constructivist approach in the development of counselor skills related to Roger's core conditions for developing a therapeutic alliance. The growth in higher level functioning of counselor trainees in responding to clients was evident during the semester through professor observation of counseling sessions and the administration of two rating scales indicative of such growth. All of which was facilitated through a multilayered feedback constructivist approach.

As one student commented, "I learned the importance of empathy and attentive listening. It is important to understand the world-view of the client and not jump into solving the problems."

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