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Teaching Counseling Theories by Building Community

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The importance of community is that it nurtures “a feeling of connectedness and a belief that everyone’s destiny is intertwined, yet as individuals, retaining a healthy degree of independence” (Sweeney, 1998, p. 83). People have a need to feel connected, be encouraged to feel capable, and have opportunities provided to contribute to the greater need of the group (Albert, 2003). According to Sonstegard and Bitter (2004), there is no limit to the power of community because

The traits that emanate from a feeling of belonging are cooperation, friendship, empathy, caring, interest in others, courage, and confidence. Our capacity for this community feeling is the measure of our mental health. People with social interest meet these tasks with a willingness to solve them usefully. They treat others as they would want to be treated by contributing, participating, and seeking to make a difference. (p. 80)

To build community in the classroom, a teacher must implement a horizontal model of teaching in which the teacher views himself or herself as being on an equal plane as the student and behaves in a way that reflects equality. The teacher is actively reaching forward with one hand, building upon his or her knowledge, and reaching backward with the other hand to pull the students forward.

Building Community in a Classroom: An Example

Day 1

As students enter the room, the professor asks, “When others come in, who would be willing to say, ‘Come on in, you’re right on time! Would you like to join our group?’” The students find partners and read directions, which are adapted from Life Coaching Studio (2003). They ask each other questions, noticing

where their partners look (up for visual, to the side for auditory, and down for either kinesthetic or internal dialogue) (Helm, 1994) to help them know what verbs to use when they talk, such as, “I see what you mean...” or “It sounds like you mean...”

Then the professor asks the pairs to choose other pairs, and the new group of four temporarily splits to form new pairs. They choose a “car” and a “driver” (Kottman, Ashby, & Degraaf, 2001). The car has closed eyes, and the driver, with hands on the shoulder of the car, gives commands for moving forward, left, right, or backward. The idea is to move without touching anyone—the opposite of bumper cars. After changing positions and repeating the activity, the group of four discusses how this exercise is like life.

The groups merge with another group and become a group of eight for Back Scratching: writing an encouraging phrase on paper on each person’s back. They exchange names and note AVK (auditory, visual, or kinesthetic styles). After writing encouraging phrases on each other’s backs, the students take turns telling each other what the phrases on their backs say. They practice active listening, paraphrasing, and thanking each other.

Next the groups of eight are asked to develop a course syllabus for the semester. An example syllabus is given to them. They have the ability to add or delete sections from the syllabus and to choose which chapters to study. The students discuss the issues that professors face when creating a syllabus and realize that not everyone initially agrees, but together they practice active listening and paraphrasing, compromising to create a syllabus. Then the groups share syllabi with each other, and the individual groups discuss how they approached the task. Why did they decide to do things one way instead of another? Why did they choose to study certain topics? Why did they create certain rules or requirements? Then the groups use the open discussion to create a new syllabus.

Before they leave for the day, the students answer questions based on the teaching method developed by Ogle (1986): (1) What did I like about today’s class?

(2) What did I learn from today's class? and (3) What would I still like to know? The professor also asks the students to write their vision and hand it in during the next class. In their essay, they reflect on their life and discuss what events helped them get where they are, what are their strengths, how will these strengths help them get where they want to be, and where do they see themselves at the end of their lives.

After class, the professor reads the students' comments, making notes to answer their questions at the appropriate time throughout the semester. Then he or she reads their example syllabuses and uses those to create a rough draft for their real course syllabus.

Day 2

The professor asks students to find partners they have not yet spoken to, come up with a list of questions they would like to ask people when they first meet, and ask them of their partners. After 5 minutes, the groups of two combine to make groups of four and share and answer each other's questions. The professor goes from group to group and answers a few questions from each group. He or she also tries to remember names of more students.

Twenty minutes into the class, the professor pulls sock balls out of his or her bag and instructs each group of four to combine with another group of four. Each group uses a sock ball to do a get-acquainted activity (Kottman et al., 2001). The thrower says, "Linda, here comes the ball," and then tosses it. The receiver says, "Thank you, Brandy." This continues until everyone has a turn, establishing a pattern. The group leader asks, "How is this like life?" and allows time for discussion. More balls are added. Some balls are dropped and retrieved. Again the leader asks, "How is this like life?" Lastly, a rubber chicken is introduced, passed either left or right, without comment while the balls are tossed, and the same question is asked and discussed. At the end of the class, the students receive the syllabus for the semester and discuss whether or not any changes should be made. The professor notes their comments and suggestions and then goes into the day's lesson.

Day 3

The students form groups of four and discuss juggling college work with their other daily responsibilities. Ten minutes later, the each group combines with another and sits in a circle on the floor. They begin a dialogue in which one person says another's name and waits for the other person to respond, "Yes Joan." Then the first student says, "I appreciate you for..." and waits for a "thank you" before rolling a ball of yarn while retaining the end. Wrapping the yarn around a finger, the student repeats the process

and soon a spider web develops with everyone connected. During the second round, the dialogue centers on good wishes: "I wish for you..." The third and fourth rounds are rewinding the yarn with "I feel connected when (or because)..." and "I plan to stay connected by..." After the activity, the professor explains to the students how they may access blackboard, so they can stay connected after classroom hours, and then begins the day's lesson.

Learning and Teaching

The professor implements academic group activities only after building community with the students, because academic group activities are more efficient and effective in the context of a trusting community (Strutton, Maier, Milliren, McDowell, & Moore, 2005). The professor makes both formal and informal assessments of the students' learning by coparticipating in the activities, observing how students approach particular tasks and intervening patiently with encouragement, respect, and guidance, using behaviors that contribute to maintaining the community.

The classroom discourses take on a narrative form with an underlying theme (Bruner, 1986). First, something goes awry; the professor presents the students with a problem. Then the individuals become aware of the plight, and finally, they interact to create meaning to the event, giving it a structured beginning, middle, and end (Bruner, 1986). Thus, learning and teaching become a symposium, where the dialogical processes are facilitated by the discourse among students and between the professor and class and professor and individual students. It is not confined by the boundaries of the classroom, as the students feel a common social interest and begin to feel comfortable communicating outside of class.

Teaching Counseling Theories

Here is a useful method. First, the professor explains to the students that they are going to study counseling theories and techniques with a class activity to reveal that they already have an understanding of these techniques, thereby building on their current knowledge. They will pretend to leave the planet Earth, because on Earth, you must have a license to practice therapy. The students will collaborate with each other and the professor with the purpose of connecting "explicitly with the history and current practices of the community" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 211). They learn the subject matter, and "they learn a different relation to the subject matter and to the community in which the information is regarded as important, through their

varying participation in the process of learning” (Rogoff, 1994, p. 211). Then, in groups of eight, the students read the information about the activity (see the appendix at the end of this article).

For each problem, groups post solutions on the wall and explain them. Afterwards, the professor divides one wall in the classroom into counseling theories. The following is an example of the activity:

Prevalent Problem 1: Several rural citizens are afraid of snakes and refuse to leave their homes. What psychological disorder(s) do these people have? How would you help these people? The professor reads the students’ ideas and guides them as they place each correct response under the appropriate counseling theory, teaching the names for the categories in which their ideas belong. They discuss how some ideas can go under more than one therapy, and how some therapists use an eclectic approach to therapy. They further compare and contrast various theories, developing a higher meaning to the new information. Then the professor presents a video about the history of therapeutic methods with a follow-up discussion.

Conclusion

It is important that professors understand the importance of building a community in their classrooms and know how to build it, because without a sense of community, students do not feel connected to each other and are hesitant about participating in learning activities. Each student brings to the classroom his or her own set of ideas and beliefs, which may not reflect the collective ideas and beliefs of the class or the professor. By building a sense of community, students learn how to talk and listen to each other and begin to feel comfortable engaging in dialogue with their peers and professor, which facilitates teaching and learning. As the students begin to approach problems through discourse and make meaning of the problems, they form a coherent understanding of the presented material and achieve the goals set by the professor.

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Appendix: The Activity

We are on the planet Zenon to help people with their problems. By using collaborative cognition, we will design therapeutic methods to decrease personal conflict, improve relationships, and relieve stress. We have access to a public library (two textbooks).

Four prevalent problems have been submitted to our committees, and the members of each committee will brainstorm all relevant knowledge of these problems and write down their ideas on strips of paper color coded for their group and tape them on the wall under the problem number. After discussion, each Zenon committee member will place respective strips of paper under the corresponding Earth therapy.

- Prevalent Problem 1: Several rural citizens are afraid of snakes and refuse to leave their homes.
- Prevalent Problem 2: Married couples cannot get along. They do not listen to each other and constantly interrupt each other.
- Prevalent Problem 3: Many people have test anxiety.

How would you help the people with these problems?