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Using Learning Communities to Enhance Counseling Curriculum

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Many counseling programs include exit surveys as part of their assessment process for evaluating effectiveness of counseling curriculum (Astin, 1993; Porter & Burnett, 2003). As students complete their counseling programs of study, they are asked to evaluate the value of the counseling classes they have taken in preparing them for the counseling profession. Student comments on these surveys often include suggestions that counseling classes need to provide more experiences that connect learning with

practice. Students also express concerns about applying theoretical concepts and acquired “book” knowledge to real-life situations.

In the early Twentieth Century, John Dewey emphasized the importance of experiential learning. His research showed that students learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process (Lefrancois, 1999).

Furthermore, Howard Gardner’s research on multiple intelligences says that the American educational system focuses mainly on language and mathematical intelligences. Some research studies indicate that interpersonal intelligence (people to people skills) and intrapersonal intelligence (internal self skills) may be more essential intelligences for individual success than language and mathematical intelligences.

Learning communities are a teaching approach that provides integrated learning experiences for students instead of traditional lecture formats (Bruffee, 1995; Cross, 1998; Schon, 1995; Raymond, 2005; Tinto, 1995).

These learning experiences are designed to help students develop multiple intelligences. Cross (1998, p. 4) defines *learning communities* “as groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning”.

Cross further states that learning communities fit within the changing philosophy of knowledge brought about by the current information age, are

in agreement with what educational research tells us about learning, and have been proven to work in settings such as support groups. Learning communities use a multi-faceted approach to help students learn content knowledge and to help students learn the analytical process needed to solve real-life problems. Techniques used in learning communities include Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, case studies, role playing, critical thinking, and behavior analysis. Many of these techniques are already taught in counseling classes and are used in counseling practice. The difference between traditional counseling class formats and learning communities is that learning communities allow students to experience the content being learned as well as to discuss or to write about content.

In learning communities, the instructor acts as a facilitator and a consultant for learning. While the instructor is respected as an expert, he or she is not expected to have all of the answers. One of the advantages of using learning communities is that any topic or need may be the focus of the group. Effective learning communities require the use of planning and group skills, and they promote analytical thinking and problem-solving skills (Raymond, 2005).

Examples of learning communities that have been successfully

implemented are Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. These groups provide information about the focus topic, promote collaboration among group members and group facilitators, provide opportunities for behavioral and cognitive-behavioral analysis and planning, and offer social support to group members.

Having worked as an on-site supervisor for counselor education students for five years before becoming a counseling faculty member and practicum supervisor, I have experienced the challenges of counselor training from different perspectives. As reported in student surveys, one of the greatest challenges for on-site supervisors and university supervisors is helping students translate their knowledge and skills from coursework into practice.

Since counseling sessions are individualized to the issues of the client, students need to master the processes of:

- analyzing each presenting problem.
- helping clients identify personal and community resources.
- being able to generate possible counseling plans.

- selecting and implementing an appropriate plan.
- monitoring client progress.
- assessing the effectiveness of the plan selected.
- revising counseling plans as needed.

In my practicum classes, I have created a learning community that includes the students enrolled in the class, the students' on-site supervisors, and myself. This learning community uses progressive case studies as the primary learning technique. Each student in the practicum class prepares a progressive case study about one of his or her clients. The student must discuss this project with his or her on-site supervisor and receive signed permission from the client to prepare the study. Cases are submitted as a typed report and are also presented orally. Case studies start with a description of the client and then answer the following Socratic questions:

- What is the issue?
- As a counselor, what would you like to know about the issue that you don't currently know?
- What resources do the client or you have to address the issue?

- What is your plan for working with the client?

Since the progressive case is currently occurring in the student's practice, on-site supervisors and university supervisors facilitate the progress of the real-life case. New information from counseling sessions necessitates the adjustment of counseling session goals and interventions.

Class sessions are conducted as staff meetings around a conference table. Using pseudonyms, students present their client cases to fellow class members. A key component of the learning process is collaboration with peers to generate appropriate solutions for each case and to assess client progress. Students are actively engaged in the cases at their site and in the classroom.

Learning communities are an effective method for transfer of knowledge. Since each practicum site is unique, a variety of cases are presented in the class consultations. This gives students the opportunity to examine counseling issues that they do not experience first-hand at their site. Student evaluations for the last four years support the learning community as an effective tool for helping students make the transition from the classroom to counseling practice.

Benefits of using the learning community concept to teach a practicum class include:

- Students are engaged in interactive learning which promotes retention and transfer of knowledge.
- Students are encouraged to collaborate with peers and professionals in the field (a necessary skill identified by CACREP for effective counselors).
- Students are applying knowledge in a contextual setting which facilitates the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the counseling setting.
- The learning community concepts may be applied to any type of problem: cognitive, physical, social, or emotional.
- Learning communities better prepare students for licensure exams that include a practice component such as the National Certified School Counselor Exam.

Limitations of using the learning community concept to teach a practicum class include:

- Even with the use of pseudonyms, client confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Especially in small communities, client characteristics may be distinctive enough to identify the client.

- Some cases cannot be satisfactorily resolved for the client or for the counseling student.
- Class preparation time must be done weekly since the cases are progressive. It is hard to plan for the whole semester since case developments may require a change in information provided to students or in class time allotted for a case.

As professional counselors, we emphasize the importance of retraining and new knowledge acquisition by requiring continuing education units (CEU's) for state and national licensure renewal. However, if counselors have not acquired the skill of integrating knowledge into practice, the CEU's earned may increase knowledge without informing practice. One way to help counseling students learn to integrate knowledge and practice is the use of learning communities. Learning communities provide counseling students with a learning environment rich in experience, cross-cultural awareness, and practical application of targeted counseling skills.

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