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Enhancing Students' Multicultural Counselling Competencies: A Self-Reflected Field Activity

Kassan, Annusha

University of Calgary

ENHANCING STUDENTS' MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING COMPETENCIES: A SELF-REFLECTIVE FIELD ACTIVITY

Annusha Kassan   Amy Rose Green

University of Calgary

In this conceptual paper, we address the importance of integrating experiential learning and self-reflection into the training of counselling psychology students, and take the position that these processes are critical in the development of multicultural counselling competencies. As such, the literature on cultural competence in counselling psychology is reviewed. Specifically, the relationship between self-reflection and cultural competence is examined, and different options for learning through experience are proposed, including moving outside of the classroom. We conclude the paper with implications for classroom teaching, highlighting how students and educators alike can benefit from experiential learning and self-reflection.

Keywords: Cultural Competence, Multicultural Counselling Competencies, Experiential Learning, Self-Reflection, Teaching and Learning

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Canada and the U.S. contain about five percent of the world's population and almost a quarter of the world's international migrants – a number that reached 232 million in 2013 (Martin, 2013). Given this diversity, counselling psychologists in these countries will inevitably work alongside

individuals and families from various backgrounds and cultures. In an effort to attend to the needs of diverse clients, there has been increasing attention paid to the development of multicultural counselling competencies within counselling psychology training programs (Coleman, 2006; Kim & Lyons, 2003) and multiple strategies have been proposed to help students develop in this area (Davies, Lewis, Anderson, & Bernstein, 2015).

In this conceptual paper, we position experiential learning and self-reflection as effective processes to enhance cultural competence among students and advocate for their active use inside and outside the classroom. To this end, we will examine the relationship between cultural competence and self-reflection. Further, we will describe different options for learning through experience, including moving outside of the classroom. Finally, we will discuss the benefits of experiential learning and self-reflection as well as implications for classroom teaching.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Multicultural competency can be conceptualized as the extent to which counselling psychologists possess appropriate awareness, knowledge, and skills when working with people from diverse backgrounds (Sue, 2001). Moreover, some scholars have discussed the role of the multicultural counselling relationship as an important component of cultural competency (Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000). Although the value of multicultural training itself has been empirically validated (Manis, 2012), surprisingly limited research has explored *how* to effectively cultivate multicultural competency in graduate students (Davies et al., 2015; Kim & Lyons, 2003).

Didactic teaching strategies that focus solely on intellectual exercises (such as reading and writing) may not adequately prepare students to address their cultural biases and assumptions (Warren, Hof, McGriff, & Blue Morris, 2012). Contrarily, experiential learning processes

typically contain a strong affective component that can facilitate emotionally-charged learning experiences and encourage students to challenge and expand their values and beliefs (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Warren et al., 2012). Given the importance of cultural competence in the field, it is timely to further explore the degree to which experiential learning can promote growth in counselling psychology students (Coleman, 2006; Sinacore & Kassan, 2011).

LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Experiential learning is a means for acquiring knowledge through action (Warren et al., 2012) and can link multicultural theory to practice (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). The purpose of this type of learning is not to emulate another person's exact cultural experience, but rather "to develop awareness and accuracy of understanding about the viewpoints of others and to move out of a culturally encapsulated view of the world" (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002, p. 2). Both researchers and students have supported experiential processes that provide exposure to diverse cultures in counsellor psychology training programs (Greene et al., 2014; Roysircar et al., 2005). Some examples of experiential learning activities that have been recommended in the literature include role-playing, cross-cultural interviews, community events, faculty modeling of multicultural counselling skills, and simulation games (Greene et al., 2014; Kim & Lyons). Most research exploring experiential learning within multicultural counselling training has been limited to the classroom (e.g., Roysircar et al., 2005), yet scholars have asserted that the most valuable experiential learning take place outside of the classroom (e.g., Sinacore & Kassan, 2011).

MOVING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Although direct interaction with different cultures is more difficult to coordinate (Greene et al., 2014), this type of learning comprises a valuable component of training that can positively impact

multicultural counselling competencies (Sinacore & Kassan, 2011). A study by Roysircar et al. (2005) found a positive correlation between counselling students' participation in a mentoring program for English as a second language students and their levels of perceived cultural competence and racial attitudes. However, more research is needed that explores the role of this type of experiential learning in shaping cultural competence. For example, although Priester and colleagues (2008) found that 34% of multicultural counselling courses investigated had students attend a cultural event, research has yet to thoroughly explore the ways such experiences can impact the development of multicultural counselling competencies.

LEARNING THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION

Regardless of where experiential learning takes place, there is a consensus that experience alone is not enough to consolidate learning; rather, it should be coupled with reflexivity to enable learners to gain the maximum benefit from new contexts (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Greene et al., 2014; Roysircar et al., 2005). Self-reflection can be conceptualized as an active and intentional process of critically examining one's knowledge and past experiences with the aim of deepening understanding and improving future alternatives (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). As such, this process can facilitate multicultural self-awareness, as it encourages students to consider the cultural contexts that influence their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). This relationship is particularly important given the strong agreement that self-awareness composes the foundation for enhancing cultural competence (Collins, Arthur, & Wong-Wylie, 2010) and has been linked to better outcomes (Torres-Rivera et al., 2001).

Self-reflection plays an important role throughout experiential learning. That is, it is helpful during the activity (while consolidating large volumes of information and addressing emerging emotions) and following the activity (while making sense of new ideas and information) (Collins

et al., 2010). Writing has been identified as a meaningful reflective practice that can help students critically examine their experiences and lead to a deeper understanding. Furthermore, processing and debriefing with facilitators and other students comprises an important component of the reflection process, as it can help make sense of new ideas and resolve any powerful feelings that emerge during the activity (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Greene et al., 2014).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM TEACHING

Clearly, experiential learning and self-reflection can take on many forms, and have been reported to have many benefits (see Green et al., 2014). For example, scholars have identified these processes as being critical to the development of multicultural counselling competencies, but are also in need of future research (see Sinacore & Kassan, 2011). While the idea of integrating experiential learning and self-reflection into the counselling psychology curriculum seems appealing, there are some tensions to consider. Traditionally, counselling psychologists executed their primary helping roles within their offices. Given this history, it is not surprising that most of the training in the field of counselling psychology has been didactic in nature, and predominantly occurs within the classroom (Coleman, 2006). Recently, however, additional roles such as advocacy and consultation have been pressed onto the profession. Furthermore, the multicultural movement has challenged the status quo by suggesting that educators and students need to leave their offices and classrooms in order to reach a wider array of clients and ultimately learn through different types of learning (Manis, 2012).

Thus, if we are to increase self-reflection inside and outside of the classroom as a means of enhancing cultural competence, we believe that it needs to start with educators. That is, it is important for counselling psychology instructors to value the role of self-reflection and engage in the practice themselves. It would be practically impossible to expect students to immerse

themselves in a process that can be challenging and emotional, without modeling the critical role of such an exercise. Moreover, bringing self-reflection into the classroom often means accepting, cultivating, and managing conflicting views and discourses among the student body (Torres-Rivera et al., 2001).

Even when these challenges are welcomed by educators and students alike, an important bridging needs to take place to translate self-reflection into increased cultural competence. Again, the role of the instructor becomes critical in helping students make connections between their own thoughts, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they can become more culturally sensitive to others and meet them with appropriate competency. When this type of bridging takes place in the classroom, students' vulnerability needs to be taken into consideration.

Alternatively, avoiding experiential learning and self-reflection can be extremely costly, especially as it may mean multiple missed opportunities to enhance cultural competence among students. Given how critical it is for counselling psychologists to be able to meet the needs of their culturally diverse clients, we cannot afford to stay away from self-reflection simply because it can become complex within the classroom. The manner in which we train students to become ethical and competent counselling psychologists sets the stage for their subsequent professional behaviour and practice (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Thus, it seems critical to introduce a practice of self-reflection early on, in a safe environment, in order to develop cultural competence.

Evidently, there are a number of factors to consider when implementing experiential learning and self-reflection into the curriculum. In working toward the development of multicultural counselling competencies, the nature of the experiential learning activity itself and the type of reflexivity selected to accompany it are critical (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Thus, it is important for educators to be purposeful about selecting appropriate experiential learning activities, which

have clear, related goals and outcomes. These expectations should be well explained to students at the start of courses. Moreover, as with all course assignments, grading schemes need to be clearly communicated with students. While experiential learning is often graded on a pass or fail basis, it is important for students to know what is expected of them in to obtain a passing grade.

Subsequently, experiential learning activities need to be monitored throughout students' professional development and debriefed on a regular basis. Self-reflecting on one's learning can take on many forms – from journaling, to one-on-one discussions with the instructor, to larger group process-oriented conversations (Manis, 2012). Throughout such debriefing, educators should set clear ground rules to ensure safety and confidentiality. Furthermore, in planning experiential learning activities, it is helpful for educators to embrace the process of self-reflection. In doing so, they may be more likely to examine their own assumptions and biases throughout their teaching. This means not only critically examining their own cultural identities, beliefs, and values, but also their attitudes and experiences with experiential and self-reflective activities in the classroom. Educators can reflect upon their assumptions about these types of activities compared to more traditional teaching methods, the value they place in these types of activities, and their own past experiences engaging in such processes – both as students and now as educators. By keeping reflexivity at the forefront, educators are in a better position to accompany students in translating their experiential learning to their self-reflections, and ultimately increase cultural competence.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explored how the development of cultural competence can be strengthened by the use of experiential learning and self-reflection. As numerous scholars in the field of counselling psychology have proposed, the use of non-traditional teaching methods are helpful in

training students in the area of cultural competence. While the benefits of stepping outside of the classroom have been well documented, such practices remain the exception within the curriculum. As such, we invite educators to think about how experiential learning and self-reflection can enrich their own personal experiences and in turn become agents of transformative learning in their classrooms.

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