

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT CENTRED APPROACHES IN THE INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING COURSE IN SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This article describes the teaching and learning practices in the Individual Counseling course in Sultan Idris Education University. The Individual Counseling course is one of the major courses offered in the Degree in Education (Guidance & Counseling) and aims to provide relevant training and qualification to beginner counselors who will be posted to schools as guidance counselors. In line with the field of helping relationships, the course places emphasis on several important aspects such as the integration of theories, counseling techniques and skills, theory-based interventions, issues pertaining to counseling interventions, case conceptions, and professional report writing. In addition to presenting the current practices, the final section puts forward several teaching suggestions suitable for the Individual Counseling course based on student centered approaches.

Key words: Teaching, Student Centred, Individual Counseling

INTRODUCTION

The Individual Counseling course is a follow-up course which integrates two basic counseling course; Basic Counseling Skills and Counseling Theories. In this course, beginner counselors are provided with guidance and relevant practices on how to conduct individual counseling sessions by applying meaningful helping skills based on counseling theories learnt. In addition to the application of therapeutically meaningful interventions within helping relationships, beginner counselors are also trained to increase their ability to think critically while building the conceptual structures to make sense of case conceptualizations, based on relevant theories. The ability and skill to understand client cases will facilitate the decision to execute relevant interventions that will yield greater achievements in the helping relationship. Besides this, they are also exposed to issues pertaining to the implementation of individual counseling sessions and ways to overcome them. To prepare them with the professional requirements of working life as licensed counselors, beginner counselors are taught how to prepare a professional counseling report at the end of the course.

COUNSELING APPROACHES

Based on the standards set by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP, 2001), a specialized accrediting body which grants accredited status to graduate-level programs in the professional counseling field, the Individual Counseling course is categorized under the area of helping relationships. This is one of the eight common core curricular areas required which form the foundation of any counseling program offered by institutions of higher learning. Within this core, the training focuses on the understanding of theories, skills and techniques of effective counseling and ethical considerations during helping relationships (CACREP, 2001). The application of knowledge and theories of counseling are seen to be crucial in constructing the professional identity of a counselor who is effective and accountable (Brott, 2006).

The need for a comprehensive understanding of counseling supervision models and techniques, practices, processes, and specific aptitude is a challenge to both the counseling instructors and beginner counselors (Vera Castellano, 2002). Hence, it is the counseling instructors' responsibility to ensure that the teaching and learning designed will enable beginner counselors to be groomed into effective helpers who will contribute to the wellness of the community.

Researchers of counseling approaches such as Nelson & Neufeldt (1998), McAuliffe & Eriksen (1999), Vera Castellano (2002), Guiffrida (2005), and other previous researches have recommended that the constructivist methods is appropriate in educating beginner counselors. According to Vera Castellano (2002), the training of counselors cannot be achieved through memorization methods. This is because different clients require different approaches and the application of different theories. As reiterated by McAuliffe & Eriksen (1999), theories such as personality theories and counseling theories are mere 'stories' rather than essential truths. Every counselor and client will bring a different meaning to their counseling session. Hence, a thorough understanding of counseling concepts and the skillful application and integration of complementary methodologies and techniques should be offered tailored to each unique client. Multicultural and pluralistic alertness regarding individual client should be infused in the training courses to develop counseling competence among beginner counselors. The quality of counseling services can be improved through self explorations and feedback from others.

Constructivism assumes that learning is constructed through social activity. Students will communicate among themselves and learning is shaped and evolved through negotiation within the communicating individuals (Adam & Slater, 2002). They are actively involved in the learning process (Devlin, 2006) and have the opportunity to relate with their daily lives (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Within the helping relationships of counseling, beginner counselors are encouraged to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations while conducting counseling interventions. The willingness to discuss, give and respond critically will assist them to better understand and apply new approaches (Guiffrida, 2005) relevant to the uniqueness of their clients during the counseling training sessions. This will encourage them to develop their potential as an effective counselor (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). The constructivist approach provides meaningful experiences which will assist them overcome the various challenges of the realities of the working context.

Based on the constructivist approach, it is proposed that counseling pedagogy should create a student-centered or student-oriented approach to training (Weiss, 1986; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999, Vera Castellano, 2002, Osborn et al, 2004; Corey, 2005; Guiffrida, 2005, and Morrisette & Gadbois, 2006). The characteristics are as follows:

- Counseling instructor act as facilitator, while the beginner counselor or student is actively involved in the teaching and learning session (Rohizani et. al., 2003);
- Beginner counselor is responsible for decision making, self exploration, and communications with others (Vera Castellano, 2002);
- Beginner counselor creates new understanding through the meaning making of their experiences (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999);
- Beginner counselor is encouraged to think and solve problems in groups (Brott, 2006);
- The activities and learning environment is controlled by the beginner counselor (Barr & Tagg, 1995);
- Learning is linked to everyday events (Brooks & Brooks, 1999); and
- Beginner counselor builds autonomy and healthy relationships with others (Vera Castellano, 2002).

All the characteristics listed are put into practice in the teaching and learning approaches in the Individual Counseling course offered in Sultan Idris Education University. Techniques such as role play, pair work, demonstrations, question & answer sessions, discussions, journal writing and mock counseling provide meaningful experiences to beginner counselors. Through these experiences, they are guided to create self knowledge regarding the counseling theories and principles learnt and apply them into real world contexts.

Student-Centered Approach in the Individual Counseling course

The Individual Counseling course is offered to semester 4 students following the Degree in Education program (Guidance & Counseling). Within the 14-week semester, beginner counselors will follow a two-hour session weekly. Each session is divided into four phases.

Phase 1

For the first 15 minutes, the instructor will provide a brief overview regarding the basic concepts in counseling theories to review beginner counselors' prior knowledge. In this phase, learning takes the form of mass lecture.

Phase 2

In the next 30 minutes, the students will form heterogeneous groups of five members. They are then required to analyze a conceptual case while the instructor moves from one group to another to facilitate discussions and guide students to relate the case to relevant theories. Following this, groups will share their understandings regarding the case concerned with other groups. They are also encouraged to ask questions with other group members. This activity which lasts for about 10 minutes will assist students to derive at a general conclusion regarding the case.

Phase 3

In this phase, one of the students is requested to share any problems or issue that they might be facing with the rest of the class for 10 minutes. This self exposure is done on a voluntary basis and can cover any problems currently faced or that happened previously. During this session, all beginner counselors are reminded of the need to conform to professional ethics and to uphold the privacy and ensure that there will be no negative repercussions associated with personal disclosure or confessions. In addition, the volunteer can also stop the sessions at any time if they are placed in a vulnerable position. Then, each group is given 40 minutes to discuss and conceptualize the case presented.

Phase 4

Each group will provide suggestions for interventions and the justifications behind each intervention. Again, the instructor will guide students through questioning so as to generate ideas from group members. Each group will then present their perspective and others are encouraged to question and debate on the matter based on the various counseling theories. However, it is acknowledged that conceptualization of the problem and interventions suggestions will vary because each group member have different backgrounds, cultures, and values which influence their decision-making.

Apart from the class activities, starting in week 3, learning activities are also conducted in the counseling laboratories. The activities here provide a platform for beginner counselors to assess their helping relationships approaches and build their personal identity as counselors. Instructors will be present to facilitate the integration of skills, techniques, theoretical approaches appropriate to individual personalities. Activities are conducted within two hours in heterogeneous groups of eight to ten students. During the first 40 minutes, a group member will play the role of a client while the instructor will be the counselor. They will be seated face-to-face. During the role play activity, instructors will pause at specific junctures during the interaction with the client and signal to the other group members, they are supposed to apply counseling skills by asking questions to the client. Prompts were offered to explore students' reactions to the session. The client will only respond to group members who can 'help' them then.

Following this, the instructor will guide all members to evaluate the skills, techniques and theoretical application utilized within the session. The client voicing out his reflections of the session will initiate the 30-minute activity. The client will share feelings, perspectives, and expectations of the responses presented. The client will also identify the responses that were categorized as therapeutic in nature. Group members will then share their views regarding appropriate interventions from the perspective of a client. Within the next 30 minutes, the instructor will demonstrate a few major techniques related to counseling theories. In the last 20 minutes, students will pair up and play the role of counselor and client alternately. The client will then provide feedback regarding the counselor responses.

In this course, students are required to conduct and evaluate mock counseling sessions and journal writing as their assignments. Each beginner counselor is required to video-tape any counseling sessions conducted by their juniors. The student then provides written views, feedback, suggestions for improvement and personal reflections based on the recording. For the journal writing assignment, students are required to reflect on their knowledge, feelings, experiences

and expectations during the entire laboratory session. In fact, instructors will be able to make improvements and improvisations of the learning sessions based on the students' self disclosure about their learning experiences.

DISCUSSION

Based on the teaching and learning practices in the Individual Counseling course, it can be concluded that learning sessions take the form of mass lecture and small groups in the counseling laboratories. The formation of small groups is seen to facilitate the involvement of all students and hence assist instructors to give focus on each individually. The interactive learning experiences will help to build beginner counselors' knowledge and competence pertaining to the application of counseling theories and skills (Brott, 2006). The students are able to discuss and receive feedback from instructors and their peers in a conducive environment (Anderson et al, 1986). This will assist them in deciding on an approach which suits the personality (Corey, 2005). The other advantages of group work include enhancement of collaboration among students, the openness and collegiality among students will assist in the learning process (Vera Castellano, 2002). In addition, beginner counselors are able to develop their skills at their own pace and according to their own learning capabilities. This will also help development of effective social and communication skills. An open and conducive learning environment will optimize student involvement.

Teaching techniques that encompasses student-centered practices such as role play, demonstrations, observational learning, question and answer session, discussions, constructive feedback, and journal writing are the main teaching practices utilized in the Individual Counseling course. Experts in the field of counseling such as Rabinowitz (1997), Carkhuff (2000), Baumgarten & Roffers (2003), Osborn et. al (2004), Little et. al (2005), Morrissette & Gadbois (2006), and Dollarhide et. al (2008) concurred that these techniques are effective in the development of effective and competent counselors. They also proposed that exposure to counseling sessions with real clients will promote better student learning and understanding when faced with the complexities of genuine contexts. Beginner counselors can assess their own ability in handling specific clients. The discussions and feedback provide opportunities to try different approaches to social and communication skills. Apart from that, students are able to evaluate and perceive a concept from a wider perspective and foster social construction of applied concepts. Although such techniques are time-consuming, Nelson & Neufeldt (1998) stress on the importance of such learning approaches to allow students to practice appropriate roles and thus improve client outcomes.

Although group learning is an effective way to assist beginner counselors with basic communication skills during counseling, there are certain drawbacks. For example, a standard training technique which involves role playing situations or often referred to as simulated counseling experience (Weiss, 1986). At times beginner counselors are reluctant to role play or to self-disclose in the client role or sometimes it can be difficult to portray an authentic client disposition. Thus, the mock counseling conducted is superficial in nature and there is a general feeling of artificiality about these activities.

Instructors also face many challenges while conducting these training sessions. They need to be fully prepared to demonstrate effective counseling skills, provide impromptu responses to clients, and respond to questions from beginner counselors. It is also the responsibility of instructors to conduct teaching experiences appropriately, monitor

student behavior, design teaching experiences that can enhance student learning, and ensure ethical teaching practices. Apart from that, instructors are sometimes faced with ethical dilemmas which arise during student-centered activities such as maintaining professional boundaries, informed consent, equal treatment among students or trainer objectivity, and instructors' personal capacity and flexibility to conduct such activities. In fact, instructors need to be aware that not all students will gain benefits from the activities conducted (Morrissette & Gadbois, 2006). In order to better understand the effectiveness of counseling pedagogy and improve the education of beginner counselors in training, instructors need to evaluate the content and effectiveness of such activities and elucidate areas where further instruction or alternative activities may be needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Other than the teaching techniques discussed, the use problem-based learning (PBL) can generate meaningful knowledge and experiences for beginner counselors. As proposed by Nelson & Neufeldt (1998), problem-based learning provides an alternative approach to the training of future counselors. PBL advocates state that course material is more likely to be retained and applied when presented as cases reflecting real life applications of class material. PBL encourages student autonomy in analyzing cases, with the instructor serving initially as a structuring facilitator before gradually becoming less active as students take more responsibility of their learning. In the Individual Counseling course, the conceptualization of the problem from a theoretical perspective and possible forms of interventions are discussed and presented in small groups. Following this, large group discussion explores the application of relevant theories to the presented problem thus engaging the students in processing the information and demonstrating their comprehension of the context.

Beginner counselors need to explicitly informed of their roles, responsibilities and boundaries during counseling sessions with clients (Morrissette & Gadbois, 2006). They must be made aware of the intimacy in the counseling relationship and maintain respect for the client and avoid engagement in activities that might compromise their personal or professional needs at the expense of the client especially so when their potential clients are school children. They are accountable at all times for their behavior and must be aware that all their actions and behaviors will reflect on their professional integrity. Instructors need to be alert and prepared at all times to address and resolve any possible problems that may arise with regards to ethical issues and considerations.

CONCLUSION

The student-centered activities designed during counseling training were successful in encouraging beginner counselors to be active and autonomous in their learning. They were guided to construct their counseling knowledge and skills according to their own realities and personal resources as unique individuals. In addition, as the student-centered activities progressed, students exhibited improved skills in using available information to conceptualize cases, generate hypotheses and use information presented to refute or support related theories, suggest appropriate interventions, and display context-specific understanding of cases presented. To ensure beginner counselors' success in learning, instructors need to consider appropriate training pedagogy in implementing appropriate learning experiences. This is important because as school counselors, the interventions they practice have substantial impact to school students' educational and personal development in the classroom and beyond.

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