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# Reflective Learning within a Counselor Education Curriculum

## **Abstract**

The literature on counselor education and supervision acknowledged the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection in supervision. As counselor educators we emphasized a need to prepare students for reflective practice prior to the practicum experience. In order to investigate how active learning and opportunities were being infused, we conducted an inquiry into the core curriculum of a Community Counseling program. Learning activities were categorized and charted according to the eight core areas of counselor education. This case study analysis provides a guide for a curriculum review of reflective learning and a catalyst for further inquiry.

# Reflective Learning within a Counselor Education Curriculum

David J. Tobin, Rebecca A. Willow, Erin K. Bastow and Erica M. Ratkowski

The literature on counselor education and supervision acknowledged the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection in supervision. As counselor educators we emphasized a need to prepare students for reflective practice prior to the practicum experience. In order to investigate how active learning and opportunities were being infused, we conducted an inquiry into the core curriculum of a Community Counseling program. Learning activities were categorized and charted according to the eight core areas of counselor education. This case study analysis provides a guide for a curriculum review of reflective learning and a catalyst for further inquiry.

**C**ounselor educators are challenged to cultivate reflective learning habits within students that will facilitate the development of a reflective practitioner. In addition to theory, experience, and skill training, self-awareness and reflectivity have been deemed essential for counselor development and professional growth (Skovholt, 2001). Schon (1983) provided an impetus for reviewing reflection-in-action across professional practice. He contrasted technical rationality, shaped by research, education, and practice, with reflection-in-action or intuitive performance that helps practitioners to effectively deal with “situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” (p. 50). His work has prompted the contribution of personal learning to the development of a professional worldview (Hoshmand, 1994). Primarily, we became interested in how reflection-in-action was operationalized in counselor education and training.

## Counselor Supervision

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) explored stages of counselor development and emphasized a process of continuous professional reflection that encouraged reflection on professional and personal experiences, a supportive work environment, and a reflective stance. More recently, this reflective stance has been referred to as reflectivity (Skovholt, 2001). The literature on counselor development and reflectivity has mostly focused on counselor supervision. Neufeldt (1999) introduced a framework for practicum supervision that emphasized an interpersonal environment that supported active reflection. Counselors-in-training were encouraged to engage in reflectivity, defined as “the process that involved attention to the therapist’s own actions, emotions, thoughts in the counseling session, and to the interaction between the client and the therapist” (p. 6). Furthermore, she cited evidence that reflectivity and self-awareness contributed to counselor development, deliberate practice, and perhaps extended beyond formal training

(Neufeldt, 2007). In a similar manner, Sweitzer and King (1999) offered groundwork for the supervised internship that acknowledged the critical role of self-understanding in forming effective counseling relationships. They reported that self-understanding helped the internship student to successfully manage three major pitfalls: projection, professional myopia, and the tendency to confuse difference with deviance. Internship was regarded as an opportunity to “teach you about aspects of yourself and review unresolved issues in your life” (p. 140). Tobin also focused on unresolved issues within counselors-in-training and developed a supervision model for countertransference work on the “hidden client” (Tobin, 2003; Tobin & McCurdy, 2006). Ward and House (1998) emphasized the reflective stance in counselor supervision and cited evidence for a model of self-awareness that enhanced an integrated professional and personal identity. Guiffrida (2005) developed an Emergence Model that helped counseling students link practice to theory by engaging in continuous self-reflection. As evidenced, the central importance of reflectivity is well documented in the literature on counselor supervision.

## Reflective Learning

As counselor educators and supervisors, we have likewise emphasized the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection in counselor supervision. We also recognized that counseling students may need to acquire new learning skills in order to engage in reflectivity. Graduate students who seek reassurance through high achievement and academic success have been referred to as outcome focused (Harlow & Cantor, 1994). We have observed that counseling students seem outcome-focused and demonstrate a command of academic and study skills, information literacy, scholarly writing, classroom presentation skills, and validation through the attainment of high grades.

Counselor education programs reinforce an outcome-focused orientation by emphasizing learning objectives, cumulative grade point averages, qualifying scores on comprehensive exams, and subsequent success on national certification or state licensure exams. All of these indicators contribute to program evaluation. At the same time counseling programs are challenged to develop students who display strong counseling skills and efficacy for competent clinical practice.

Young (2004) addressed this challenge by encouraging students to use reflection when engaged in challenging helping situations. This reflective practitioner approach prompted students to process new information for greater self-awareness and multiple viewpoints. Other educators have emphasized constructivist learning that focused on self-knowledge and self-development. Guiffrida (2005) acknowledged the value of constructivist learning and contrasted it to modernist learning that relied on a facts-based approach for knowledge acquisition. According to Driscoll (1994), “nurturing reflectivity is a learning condition that constructivists assert is essential to the acquisition of goals such as reasoning, understanding multiple perspectives, and committing to a particular position for beliefs that can be articulated and defended” (p. 371). McAuliffe and Eriksen (2000) compiled literature on counselor preparation that emphasized constructed knowledge and reflective learning as essential to counselor development. They suggested guidelines to stimulate active learning including the creation of links to previously learned information, frequent recall of information, and the use of a wide range of learning methods and settings. The value of reflectivity and constructivist learning in counselor development is widely acknowledged.

The use of reflectivity and constructivist learning in practicum and internship supervision has been acknowledged (Neufeldt, 2007). We emphasize laying the groundwork for

reflective learning prior to the supervised practicum and internship experience. Early training in reflectivity, within a supportive environment may better prepare counselors-in-training to engage in the personal challenge of becoming a reflective practitioner. The integration of reflective learning has yet to be addressed in a systematic manner across the curriculum. Thus, we became interested in how reflectivity could be infused within the core curriculum of a graduate counselor education program (Willow, Bastow, & Ratkowski, 2007). For that purpose we conducted an inquiry into our Community Counseling program in order to identify reflective learning and opportunities for self-reflection and self-knowledge across the core curriculum.

## Method

This is a case study analysis of active learning and reflectivity within a Community Counseling program held in a private university located in the northeastern United States. The program is designed to meet academic requirements for national certification and state licensure for professional counselors. In order to meet this requirement, course content within the curriculum and learning objectives on each syllabi carefully follow the standards established by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001). The program is currently in the process of preparing for CACREP accreditation.

The units of analysis consisted of classroom learning experiences that offered the opportunity for active learning and reflectivity and were derived from course content. We operationally defined active learning as those classroom teaching strategies, experiences, or assignments that cultivate constructivism and cognitive engagement and are designed to stimulate reflective learning.

Two graduate assistants were employed to gather evidence of active learning and reflectivity within the core curriculum. The data consisted of syllabi and related course activities and assignments. The analysis was conducted through a three-step process. First, the graduate assistants, who collectively experienced most of the courses in review, collected and analyzed the data. Second, they reflected upon their experience with active learning in each content area (Willow, Bastow, & Ratkowski, 2007). Third, they consulted with the instructor of record to provide additional clarity and/or verification of the purpose of course assignments and activities.

The program offers a sixty credit curriculum, with a forty-eight credit foundation sequence designed to reflect the eight core content areas delineated by CACREP: Human Growth and Development; Social and Cultural Diversity; Helping Relationships; Group Work; Career Development; Professional Identity; Assessment; and Research and Program Evaluation. The additional twelve credits are part of a certificate for Advanced Counselor Studies which were added to meet the sixty credit requirement for state licensure. For this study, advanced courses and supervised practicum and internship were omitted from analysis. By limiting our analysis to courses within the eight core content areas we attempted to enhance applicability to other Community Counseling programs. The units of analysis were delineated and charted within the eight core areas of counselor education (See Table 1).

## Results

### *Human Growth and Development*

Assignments in the human growth and development content area required students to reflect on their individual and family development and how these might affect counseling skills, professional development, and the therapeutic relationship. Students

also examined the role of self-awareness in maintaining a counselor-client relationship appropriate to the client's developmental level. This was explored in the context of aiding a client to achieve optimum development in his or her stage of life. The culmination of the self-reflective exercises in human growth and development was an examination of one's critical life events written as a formal paper. According to the instructor, the goal of this assignment was to build awareness of how one's personal encounters with developmental crises can influence one's approach to counseling.

#### *Social and Cultural Diversity*

Reflective learning exercises in this content area were aimed at understanding one's values, attitudes, experiences, and biases related to culture. Students were required to write weekly self-reflection papers, that focused on increased cultural self-awareness. Several experiential learning activities were incorporated into the multicultural issues in counseling course, including a cross-cultural experience to promote greater understanding of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination as well as an appreciation for diversity. Closure on each experiential exercise included self reflection as an integrated component.

#### *Helping Relationships*

Activities in the helping relationships content area were created to facilitate an examination of the reciprocal relationship of theoretical orientation and personal experience. Students were asked to investigate their worldview in conjunction with the concept of an effective helping relationship. This was done in written form and in live class discussions and internet message boards. Discussion topics included countertransference, professional growth, building effective therapeutic relationships, and the consultation process.

#### *Group Work*

Learning in the group work content area was structured around the idea that reflectivity is an essential component of effective group counseling. Students were members of interpersonal process groups led by counseling psychology doctoral students. The principles of group dynamics were learned firsthand as students wrote reflection papers after each group session that detailed knowledge of group process, developmental stages, member roles, and leadership styles as each applied to the individual's experience as both a group member and a counselor-in-training. A final paper was required which delineated personal and professional awareness obtained through group experience and information learned in classroom activities.

#### *Career Development*

Students were asked to investigate the influence of life events on their personal career history. Class assignments required an exploration of one's interests, abilities, personality, and occupational preferences according to the classification systems of traditional career self-assessment tools. Students worked in dyads to practice a career counseling interview. The goals of this dialogue were to develop a holistic picture of one's occupational experiences and preferences, to examine the ways in which interests, abilities, personality, and occupational styles contribute to career development, and to reflect on consistencies between self-assessment results and self-selected occupational goals.

#### *Assessment*

The Assessment course required students to administer, score, and interpret several self-report instruments on themselves including personality inventories, intelligence tests, lifestyle assessments, and measures of anger and depression. Students then reflected on these results and potential implications for counseling along

with a written, integrative summary. This activity also afforded students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the assessment and to reflect on their personal experience of taking the tests and receiving results.

*Professional Identity*

Learning objectives for professional identity included: (a) developing an understanding of personal wellness, self care, and prevention of burnout or compassion fatigue, (b) becoming aware of one’s capacity for professional advocacy, (c) conceptualizing one’s development in professional counseling, and (d), reflecting on one’s personal, academic, and professional growth in a counselor education program. These goals were addressed with the following self-reflective activities: (a) participation in a “Counselor

Wellness Day” that emphasized personal, physical, and mental self care, (b) identification and reflective support of a social justice or professional advocacy issue, (c) creation of a professional disclosure statement, and (d) creation of a professional portfolio.

*Research and Program Evaluation*

The primary emphasis of Research and Program Evaluation is on content knowledge and critical analysis. However, a singular activity that encouraged reflectivity was noted. The instructor utilized a stimulus question designed to promote self-reflection. Students were required to examine their potential investigator/participant bias within the methodology of their qualitative research proposal. This activity underscores the relevance of self-knowledge.

**TABLE 1**  
**Reflectivity Learning Exercises by CACREP Content Area**

| CACREP Content Area           | Reflective Exercise   | Reflectivity  |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Human Growth & Development    | Self-Reflection Paper                                       | Effects of critical life events on personal and professional development  |
| Social & Cultural Diversity   | Self-Reflection Papers                                      | Awareness of cultural issues and personal bias  |
|                               | Cross-Cultural Experience                                   | Knowledge of “otherness” and systems of privilege   |
| Helping Relationships         | Personal Theory Paper                                       | Awareness of personal and professional experiences shaping view of human behavior   |
|                               | Blackboard Discussions (electronic message board)           | Express growth as a counselor through collaborative discussion  |
|                               | In-Class Workshop Groups                                    | Collaborate with colleagues; Discuss personal views   |
| Group Work                    | Group Counseling  | Increase interpersonal learning   |
|                               | Final Exam / Synthesis Paper                                | Integrate course content and group counseling experience  |
| Career Development            | Career Life Line  | Awareness of life events leading to occupational choice   |
|                               | Integrated Career Interview                                 | Exploration of personality, interests, and career aspirations   |
| Professional Identity         | “Counselor Wellness Day”                                    | Awareness of personal physical and mental health  |
|                               | Advocacy Project  | Identification of a social justice or professional counseling issues  |
|                               | Professional Disclosure Statement<br>Professional Portfolio | Professional and theoretical orientation<br>Culmination of professional training and the establishment of scope of practice |
| Assessment                    | Personality Assessment                                      | Awareness of personality’s affect on worldview and behavior   |
| Research & Program Evaluation | Stimulus Question   | Awareness of potential investigator/participant bias in a qualitative research proposal                                     |

## Discussion

The literature on reflectivity in counselor education has primarily focused on the supervisory experience. We acknowledged a need to prepare students for reflective practice prior to the supervised practicum, and conducted an initial inquiry into active learning and reflectivity within a Community Counseling program. The results indicate that students experienced active learning and reflectivity in each of the core content areas, which suggests that reflectivity is widely practiced across the curriculum. The identified reflective learning exercises offer a guide for teaching strategies and serve as a catalyst for further development. This type of case study analysis provides faculty with a guide for a curriculum review of reflective learning, and the potential to contribute to a more deliberate and systematic effort to infuse reflectivity throughout the curriculum. The results of this study reveal that there was less emphasis on reflective learning in Research Methods and Program Evaluation. This became an area of discussion and future planning among our program faculty. It has been suggested that students could reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and values when selecting or reviewing research topics. Areas of personal subjectivity may also include researcher bias, and statements on limitations. This could be reviewed along with ethical considerations.

This descriptive study identifies reflective learning strategies embedded within the curriculum and categorized them into the eight core areas. It is beyond the scope of this study to assess the quality of these learning experiences. It may prove interesting to explore student receptivity to self-reflection in the classroom. There is literature to suggest that students have different learning styles (Hoshmand, 1994). Furthermore, constructivist learning may be met with resistance when students experience anxiety about how they will be evaluated (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Our experiences with teaching and training

graduate students suggest that the propensity for reflective learning is developmental. When leading reflective discussion or learning activities, counselor educators need to cultivate a safe and supportive learning environment (Willow, Tobin, & Toner, in press). Instructors are also advised to adhere to the ACA Code of Ethics in regard to student self-disclosure (F.7. Student Welfare; American Counseling Association, 2005). Student welfare needs to be safeguarded during self-growth experiences. Counselor educators are cautioned to “use judgment when designing training experiences that require self-disclosure; and make supervisees and students aware of the ramifications and evaluative components of experiential training” (p. 15).

The implementation of a reflective orientation requires reflective thinking on the part of counselor educators. Panel presentations or round table discussions on “best practices” could benefit counselor educators, along with suggestions for balancing constructivist learning within an outcome focused curriculum. Further inquiry into instruction that leads to reflective habits in students is warranted. Future research into the development of a reflective practitioner could benefit from a qualitative inquiry into student learning experiences with reflectivity, and the ability to assimilate self-knowledge and connect it within the developmental framework of the practicum/internship. Moving beyond the academy, researchers may also attempt to assess the quality of reflectivity required of professional counselors in clinical practice.

In summary, the literature on counselor development and counselor supervision promotes a reflective practitioner approach. We reviewed opportunities for active learning and reflectivity across the core curriculum. Ultimately, it may prove beneficial to intentionally connect reflectivity as developmental preparation for the practicum experience. Counselor educators are challenged to cultivate opportunities for reflectivity throughout the curriculum.



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