Game-Based Learning in Counselor Education: Strategies for Counselor Training

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Abstract

Counselors value equity, diversity, and inclusion (American Counseling Association, 2018). Counselor educators are tasked with ensuring counselor trainees are competent in empathetic understanding, cultural awareness, and advocacy. Game-based learning is a teaching strategy that promotes the process of acquiring empathy, cultural awareness, and advocacy (Cheng & Su, 2012; Qian & Clark, 2016). Game-based learning has many documented benefits over the last two decades (Hwang & Wu, 2012; Tsai et al., 2011) yet counselor education has not incorporated it into counselor training. The authors addressed this gap by providing a conceptual framework for incorporating GBL into training with implications for counselor educators and counselor trainees.

Keywords

game-based learning, counselor training, counselor education

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Counselor education is a dynamic field tasked with providing counselor trainees with the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to empower clients to achieve at their fullest potential (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2018; Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, 2018). The ACA (2018) requires counselor educators to stay abreast of best practices in pedagogy to ensure they are meeting the diverse learning needs of counselor trainees. The ACA (2018) and the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (2018) values equity, diversity, and inclusion and recognizes that counselor training should focus on advocacy to promote these values.

The ACA (2014) acknowledged the significance of empathy and cultural awareness as two core beliefs to the counseling profession. Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, and Mullins (2011) and Segal (2011) argued that empathy and cultural awareness are the foundation of advocacy. There are many ways to train counselors to enhance their empathy and cultural awareness. Specifically, game-based learning (GBL) is a teaching strategy that promotes empathy and multicultural awareness through the use of games. In addition, GBL provides counselor trainees with an opportunity to problem-solve situations that can enhance advocacy skills (Cheng & Su, 2012; Qian & Clark, 2016).

The research on the effectiveness of GBL spans two decades and covers many professional disciplines (Hwang & Wu, 2012; Tsai et al., 2011) yet GBL has not entered the field of counselor education. This teaching strategy can provide counselor educators and counselor trainees with a safe learning environment to acquire awareness, knowledge, and skills to help clients achieve their fullest potential. Counselor educators can use this teaching strategy to facilitate empathetic growth, cultural awareness, and advocacy in counselor trainees.

Game-Based Learning Principles

GBL incorporates games, or game mechanics, into learning environments in order to provide effective, problem-oriented structures, and promote engagement and motivation toward specific curriculum or learning goals (Cheng & Su, 2012; Poulsen, 2011; Qian & Clark, 2016). This approach often involves players solving or navigating problems within the game in order to advance closer to the game's end goal (Gee, 2008). Researchers have found that GBL is an effective teaching tool in secondary and post-secondary education settings, as well as professional training settings (Hwang & Wu, 2012; Poulsen, 2011; Qian & Clark, 2016). For example, the medical field uses games that incorporate simulation exercises aimed at developing surgical and consultation competencies (Ebner & Holzinger, 2007; Orvis et al., 2009; Poulsen, 2011).

Researchers have found that GBL offers many benefits such as: (a) increasing empathy, (b) promoting cultural awareness, and (c) strengthening advocacy (Cheng & Su, 2012; Qian & Clark, 2016). GBL could be beneficial to the counselor educator field by offering opportunities to facilitate unique situations and events for counselor trainees to encounter with immediate feedback about the learning process from the game, the instructor, and peers alike. Qian and Clark (2016) suggested GBL could aid in developing learners' knowledge, skills, and awareness associated with the class learning objectives.

Empathy

Empathy is critical to counselors connecting with their clients in a meaningful way (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Bachen, Hernández-Ramos, and Raphael (2012) found that learners immersed in a simulated game about the lives and cultures of others reported significantly higher levels of empathy than their non-playing peers. Moreover, the authors found a positive correlation between learners identifying similarities with their game characters and reported

feelings of empathy towards their character. In the debriefing sessions following the game, some learners even spoke about their characters' experiences from a first-person perspective (Bachen et al., 2012). Empathetic understanding can positively enhance learning and translate to empathetic behaviors outside the game (Plass, Homer, & Kinzer, 2015).

The findings on empathy in GBL are encouraging for the use of GBL in counselor education where feelings of empathy and interest in the experiences of others are both critical characteristics for counselors to possess (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). However, Huang and Tettegah (2010) cautioned educators to be mindful of the level of empathy as their findings suggested that high levels of empathy can be overwhelming to learners and can negatively influence their learning experience. Counselor educators want to make sure to process with counselor trainees about their empathetic understanding of their character to make meaning of game and any challenges that might have occurred as a result.

Cultural Awareness

In addition to enhancing empathy, research has found that GBL provides a platform for learners to acquire knowledge and awareness about multiple cultures (Jupit, Minoi, Arnab, & Yeao, 2011). Jupit et al. (2011) argued that GBL offers a low-risk, controlled environment to explore and engage in understanding the cultural uniqueness of game characters. The authors noted that GBL allows learners to develop awareness and knowledge of how culture can shape the multiple identities in characters. Through increased engagement with a game and its context, learners can invest in their game character, which can increase motivation to learn more about the cultural uniqueness of such characters (Cheng & Su, 2012; Gee, 2008). Additionally, Bachen et al. (2012) found that learners who engaged in the GBL exercise reported an increased interest in learning about different cultures over the weeks that followed the game play.

The findings on cultural awareness in GBL are promising for the use of GBL in counselor education where diversity, equity, and inclusion are foundations for the counseling profession (ACA, 2018; Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 2018). Jabbar and Felicia (2015) noted that developing cultural awareness through GBL offers educators an opportunity to engage learners in reflections about their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to their character and the character's culture. These engagements can contribute to enhancing awareness and personal growth about values, attitudes, and beliefs (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). Although the results are promising, it is important to recognize that research in the area of cultural awareness through GBL is limited to self-reports. More research is needed to determine if self-reports of cultural awareness translates into culturally appropriate behaviors.

Advocacy

Advocacy is an avenue by which counselors work to address barriers and inequities that impede the success of clients in a socially just manner (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, and McCullogh, 2016). Ratts et al. (2016) noted that advocacy begins after a counselor gains cultural awareness of the difficulties that a client might experience. It is through this empathetic understand that a counselor can advocate for social justice and equity.

In GBL, trainees learn about advocacy through problem-solving. Ratts et al. (2016) noted that to be a successful advocate, counselors need to understand how to problem-solve and eliminate barriers that impede success for clients. Poulsen (2011) found that problems in games exist within a context that helps support the learners' understanding and problem-solving process. Learners are presented with a problem or set of challenges and must utilize problem solving skills to progress in the game (Poulsen, 2011). This process helps learners become aware of the process of problem-solving and translating that solution into the removal of barriers that inhibit success.

Counselor educators can use problem-solving processes in games to help counselor trainees learn effective strategies to advocate for change in a socially just manner.

Risk taking. Although problem-solving and taking action are not entirely unique to GBL, this platform does provide learners with an opportunity for risk-taking in a safe learning environment (Faiola, Newlon, Pfaff, & Smyslova, 2013). Risk-taking in many non-game-based learning contexts can have long-term consequences, which might lead to learners taking fewer risks in their learning process. In GBL, learners have opportunities to experiment with various problem-solving strategies without the risk of long-term consequences, which can provide increased engagement and motivation as well as insights into new ways of thinking and understanding (Faiola et al., 2013). A low risk learning environment that offers feedback from the environment and fellow players is essential for counselor trainees as they learn to advocate for their clients.

Feedback. GBL provides learners with immediate feedback about their problem-solving and advocacy approach. One study with novice gamers found that learners who were given immediate feedback in games showed signs of increased problem-solving abilities in test-scores when compared to their non-game-based learning peers (Papastergiou, 2009). Immediate feedback from the game can offer counselor trainees a framework for how to advocate for clients through a safe space where learners are able to practice their problem-solving strategies and receive immediate feedback on their strategies with relatively low risk associated with failure (Qian & Clark, 2016).

The key to successful transfer of learning for counselor trainees is the integration of feedback from the game, the counselor educator, and their peers (Yang, 2017). Counselor educators can use feedback and reflection to help counselor trainees gain awareness, knowledge,

and skills to act in the best interest of their clients. These foundations can support counselor trainees as they navigate the complexities of working with clients to promote social justice.

Game-Based Learning in Counselor Education

Many researchers have found evidence that GBL supports learners in promoting engagement (Qian & Clark, 2016); in allowing for personal growth in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015); and with opportunities to learn from their mistakes in a safe learning environment (Yang, 2017). Each of these facets becomes important to counselor educators because the self-growth and awareness of trainees are essential components of training to become competent counselors (ACA, 2014).

The potential for GBL as a teaching strategy in counselor education is limitless. GBL could influence counselor development by helping to increase fundamental components such as empathy, cultural awareness, and advocacy. How one uses it during training will depend on the content and the counselor trainees' needs. Counselor educators do not have to be active gamers to utilize GBL but do need to be aware of the type of game they plan to use to ensure accessibility for all counselor trainees in the course. For example, utilizing video games can be a powerful learning tool but it might be difficult for counselor trainees to access such video games if required to complete the activity outside of class.

After decided on a game that fits best with your lesson, we recommend bringing that game and playing it in class instead of having students play the game outside of class. By bringing games to class, counselor educators can better control the elements of the game that are relevant to the lesson's topic. Counselor educators can also process reactions and feelings in the here-and-now with counselor trainees thereby making meaning of the learning experience.

Game-Based Learning in Practice

GBL requires preparation and simulation of events that are relevant to the topic of the lesson. Counselor educators can use different types of games (e.g., video games, board games, or card games) to illustrate the topic. For example, counselor educators can use a board game that requires players to compete against each other as a way to learn about decision-making or use a video game that requires players to work together to overcome a challenge as a way to learn about getting and giving feedback.

The following is an example of a lesson using GBL in a career counseling course. The intention of the lesson was to demonstrate how barriers influence one's career access. This lesson was conducted in the middle of the semester after several weeks of discussing career theories. We wanted to provide counselor trainees with an opportunity to empathize with their game character, learn about various cultural barriers, and conceptualize how to address inequities that might have occurred in the game.

Game preparation

The course instructor (CI) used the game The Settlers of Catan as the interactive game board for this lesson. The Settlers of Catan is a resource gathering game. Players must acquire a variation of five resources (i.e., wood, brick, wheat, ore, or sheep) to build settlements. Players that acquire the most resources are able to build settlements and acquire victory points. The player to achieve 10 victory points is declared the winner.

Point values. The purpose of this lesson was to modify the rules and game play to produce barriers or unequal access to different game resources. Prior to the lesson, the CI created an arbitrary character with a specific resource (i.e., wood, brick, wheat, ore, or sheep) to acquire in the game. The characters were based on five demographic factors (i.e., ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and marital status). Each demographic factor received a point value.

Minority status resulted in a minus-one value and majority status resulted in a plus-one value. Values were summed across the five demographic factors with a range of values from -5 to +5.

Players were randomly assigned to play the game as an individual or in a group of two or three players. The CI summed the values for each group member, which created a range of values of -15 to +15. The CI did not share the point values with individuals or groups until they wanted to acquire resources during the game.

The point values determined how many of their assigned resources they needed to acquire a settlement. For example, a player with a +5-point value would receive five settlements for every one resource. On the other hand, a player with a -5-point value would need five resources for every one settlement. Therefore, a group could be challenged with acquiring 15 resources for every one settlement. Individuals and groups with the highest point values started closest to their assigned resource while individuals and groups with the lowest point values started furthest from their resource.

Game format. The CI set up two separate game boards of Settlers of Catan on two tables at opposite ends of the classroom before the counselor trainees arrived. The CI told the counselor trainees that they would play a game for the week's lesson. The CI informed them of the game's rules by describing the game. The CI read the following statement developed from the game rules (Teuber, 1996) to the counselor trainees as information about the game and its rules: "The Settlers of Catan is a resource game that allows players to obtain available resources on the game map. Players are able to use resources and materials to build, develop, and settle regions creating wealth and opportunity thereby leading to game victory points. However, The Settlers of Catan has a game mechanic that allows a thief to rob players of their game gains at any point. The successful

player in The Settlers of Catan must work collaboratively and cunningly with to obtain the most

resources to build the largest settlement and claim total victory."

Additional rules. After reading the format of the game, the CI informed players that they

could not trade resources, talk, or work together outside of their group. Individual players were

instructed to not talk during the game, where groups could talk within their group. All group

members were instructed that they had to come to a consensus on all decisions during the game;

however, they were informed that the CI made the final decision for all players. Additional rules

for the game came out as players progressed throughout the game as a way to increase barriers for

certain groups and promote privilege in other groups. The rules and description of the game were

intentionally vague to automatically separate players into two groups (i.e., those who have played

the game before and those who have not played the game before) as a way to increase barriers for

successfully winning the game.

Game play

The game play lasted 45 minutes. The CI served as the rule enforcer and at times would

change rules to benefit individuals or groups that had positive point values. The CI kept a running

total of victory points for each individual and group on the board. The CI would frequently remind

the players of victory point totals and praise the individuals or groups with the most points for

doing well.

In addition, the CI would penalize individuals or groups who did not follow the rules.

Penalties would range from adding or removing point values, skipping turns, or by the game thief

stealing all their resources. After an individual or group obtained 10 victory points, the CI had

each individual student respond in writing to the following questions: (a) what was your initial

reaction to the game, (b) what do you think was the purpose of the game, and (c) how might you work with a client who experiences similar objectives?

After providing an opportunity for written reflection, the CI encouraged counselor trainees to have an open dialogue with peers about their experiences playing the game. They were asked to shared their point value, their assigned resource, and their reaction to their questions. The CI facilitated the discussion around the access to career resources and helped learners apply career theory to conceptualizing their career development throughout the game. After a 60-minute reflection and discussion, the CI removed all the point values, taught the groups how to play the game correctly, and had the groups replay the game for 30 more minutes followed by a 30-minute reflection about the day's lesson.

Game-Based Learning Discussion

The Settlers of Catan provided an interactive GBL opportunity for counselor trainees. This experience was designed to provide counselor trainees with an opportunity to engage in empathetic understanding, gaining a sense of cultural awareness, and to start the process of developing advocacy skills through the use of career theory. Sharing the learning discussion questions is intended to be a reflection on our experiences of using GBL as a teaching strategy.

What was your initial reaction to the game?

The purpose of this question was to get counselor trainees to reflect on their emotional reaction to the game (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). The goal was to help them gain a sense of empathy for their character. The CI wanted counselor trainees to reflect on how this game made them feel so the class could have a dialogue about career access. One of the objectives of this game was to provide a format where counselor trainees knew their goal but did not have direct access to achieve it. Therefore, we used this question to help counselor trainees reflect on what it means for clients

as they try to achieve career objectives without clear direction or guidance (Poulsen, 2011; Zunker, 2016).

GBL in this context focused on enhancing empathetic understanding of clients. This game provided counselor trainees with the benefits or consequences of characteristics they had no control over. Individuals and groups were forced to responded to the game mostly based on how the CI interacted with them (Bachen et al., 2012). In this case, individuals and groups received immediate feedback that indicated the privileges and barriers they would encounter in the game (Gee, 2008; Poulsen, 2011). Bachen et al., (2012) would suggest that both individuals and groups experienced a sense of empathy for working with unforeseen barriers despite players having different game outcomes.

Reflecting on one's personal reaction to a situation is common place in counselor training. We recommend giving counselor trainees around 7-10 minutes to write down their experience as they reflect on the game. Some counselor trainees might not feel comfortable sharing their personal reaction with their instructor or peers. Offering the counselor trainees an opportunity to write down their reaction allows them time to make meaning of their initial reaction regardless if they share the information or not. This part of reflection can help increase their sense of empathy for their clients who experience similar situations (Bachen et al., 2012).

What do you think was the purpose of the game?

The purpose of this question was to get learners to reflect cognitively on the concepts of barriers and privilege (Gee, 2008; Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). The goal was to help counselor trainees develop awareness for their characters' cultural factors related to their position in the game. This question allowed the CI to relate career theory to help counselor trainees to conceptualize the outcomes of discrimination and privilege. Pope (2012) purported that many minorities might

experience some form of discrimination in the work force through various barriers such as finance, language, religion, or other cultural factors.

In this case, the game offered as safe zone to experience the overt and covert oppressions and privileges that are seemingly inherent to the career development process. This conversation allowed counselor trainees to engage in a dialogue centered around the inequities of career access created by the game. In addition, this discussion offered counselor trainees an opportunity to take risks by sharing their personal journey through the career process and helping counselor trainees to engage with the course material as it bridged the gap between awareness into real world outcomes (Cheng & Su, 2012; Faiola et al., 2013).

Offering the counselor trainees an opportunity to reflect on the material as it relates to theory and practice can help to make the material more meaningful. We recommend allowing counselor trainees to work together in groups to apply theory to this experience as if it were a case study of oppression or privilege. Offering counselor trainees an opportunity to reflect on their experience and develop cultural awareness can help increase their problem-solving skills while giving them a forum to learn from their previous experiences (Cheng & Su, 2012; Gee, 2008).

How might you work with a client who experiences similar objectives?

The purpose of this question was to get counselor trainees to create a framework for how to behaviorally address issues of discrimination and privilege in the work places (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). The goal was to help counselor trainees understand how advocacy can promote diversity by enhancing equity and inclusion. The CI was able to scaffold the learning experience for counselor trainees as they began to create a theoretical framework for how to advocate for the identified issues in the game. The conversation focused on advocacy through theoretical conceptualization, career-related services, and collaboration that aimed to reduce career access

barriers. In the discussion, the counselor trainees were provided a forum to collaboratively explore the concepts of equity and social justice in career access.

This lesson foreshadowed the remainder of the semester by providing an experience that would inform their work on the course's final project: a comprehensive multicultural career-counseling center. Their center had to address equity and access to careers for all clients by providing developmental career counseling services that utilized evidence-based programs and interventions. Subsequent lessons focused on comprehensive approaches across the lifespan. This GBL experience helped the CI scaffold the material in subsequent lessons to foster empathy, awareness, and advocacy development (Sung & Hwang, 2013; Wu, Hsiao, Wu, Lin, & Huang, 2012). We recommend tying the GBL activity into a project where counselor trainees have to apply what they learned from the game to address a real life problem. Offering counselor trainees an opportunity to apply their GBL experience to a real world problem might help learners make meaning of the experience and increase their awareness, knowledge, and skill development (Qian & Clark, 2016).

Implications for Game-Based Learning in Counselor Education

The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) requires counselors to be aware of personal values; to attend to one's own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; and to respect diversity. Synthesizing theory, techniques, and multicultural considerations is important as counselors are required to "…maintain awareness and sensitivity regarding cultural meanings…and respect differing views toward disclosure of information" (ACA, 2014, p. 6). In addition, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2015) requires the infusion of multiculturalism into all counseling courses. A counselor's primary responsibility is to respect the welfare and dignity of every client and must always consider cultural implications throughout the entire

counseling process (ACA, 2014). GBL can provide counselor educators a forum to integrate empathetic understanding and cultural awareness to promote personal and professional growth.

Counselor Trainees

GBL provides an opportunity for counselor trainees to experience the many facets of diversity while confronting their own, inner biases. This awareness and insight allows counselor trainees to process and explore how those beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors may affect their future work with clients (Segal & Wagaman, 2017). The Settlers of Catan offered a format for counselor trainees to confront their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to inequities that might be similar to the struggles many face in career access through the sociopolitical systems in the United States (Pope, 2012; Zunker, 2016). The use of GBL in counselor education training could provide a foundation for counselor development that makes material personally tailored to the trainee's needs.

Counselor trainees need to understand and adopt the ability to provide empathy and cultural awareness to help address the needs of their clients (Segal & Wagaman, 2017; Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). In addition, counselor trainees should continuously practice effectively using empathy and cultural awareness to advocate for promoting diversity through equity and inclusion (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011; Segal, 2011; Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). GBL can provide counselor trainees the opportunity to experience a safe learning environment to explore and practice these concepts within the context of a supportive group.

The career counseling course was designed to build a sense of group support through cohesion early in the semester. Counselor trainees were encouraged to explore and reflect on their career journey and share these experiences with their peers to help facilitate cohesion. Group

cohesion helps the GBL activity to be a safe environment (Cheng & Su, 2012) for counselor trainees to experience the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects of inequity. Subsequent lessons provided an opportunity to apply awareness, knowledge, and skills to work towards developing a career counseling program that addressed social inequities by advocating to reduce barriers for their future clients.

We believe that GBL permits counselor trainees an opportunity to experience new modes and dynamics of empathetic understanding, cultural awareness, and advocacy. The unique format of GBL allows counselors to reflect upon themselves and their biases more deeply (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). We believe this format is a new and innovative way to promote competencies and address standards in a meaningful way.

Counselor Educators

Counselor educators can use GBL as a new and innovating approach in their classrooms. There are a couple things to consider when utilizing this teaching strategy. Counselor educators need to understand the type of game they want to use for their lesson. Counselor educators do not have to be active gamers to find information about different types of games. They can find information about games by doing an internet search, watching gaming videos (i.e., via YouTube, Twitch, or Mixer), consulting with a librarian, or consulting with the local game-store.

Moreover, GBL can be used in various counseling courses. We recommend using GBL in courses were the stakes are high and making errors might have long-term consequences. The GBL format provides an opportunity for counselor trainees to learn and take risk without the consequences of failing outside of the game (Faiola et al., 2013). Using GBL in a classroom setting requires that players have a sense of group cohesion to help establish a trusting learning

environment to make mistakes (Cheng & Su, 2012). We recommend building group cohesion early in a course and preparing counselor trainees in advance that they will play a game in class.

Conclusion

Research supports that GBL is a teaching strategy that provides learners with opportunities to explore, problem-solve, and process real world situations in a safe learning environment (Cheng & Su, 2012; Gee, 2008; Poulsen, 2011). Games serve as a forum to acquire and practice new skills, collaborate with peers, and receive immediate feedback about the experience from peers and instructors (Cheng & Su, 2012; Gee, 2008). Moreover, GBL provides a context for learning that increases personal and professional growth (Admiraal, Huizenga, Akkerman, & Ten Dam, 2011).

The GBL approach gives learners a chance to grow and develop as players overcoming challenges (Gee, 2008). Learners are able to develop problem-solving approaches by exploring and trying different strategies within the context of the game (Faiola et al., 2013) while learning from their mistakes (Cheng & Su, 2012). The strategies common in GBL are fundamental to counselors as they develop and use empathetic understanding and cultural awareness to problem-solving and advocate with and on behalf of their clients. The principles of GBL offer counselor trainees a unique environment to navigate and address issues they will work with in the future.

Professional competencies (ACA, 2018; 2014) and standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015) require counselor educators integrate empathy, cultural awareness, and advocacy together to help counselor trainees develop the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to promote diversity through equity and inclusion. GBL could provide counselor educators a forum to integrate and practice these values in a low risk environment that promotes engagement and ownership of learning (Ebner & Holzinger, 2007).

Finally, GBL research suggested this teaching strategy serves as a beneficial format for increasing learning, motivation, problem-solving, and empathy (Admiraal et al., 2011; Bachen et al., 2012; Cheng & Su, 2012; Faiola et al., 2013; Poulsen, 2011; Qian & Clark, 2016; Sung & Hwang, 2013) that provides counselor educators with an interactive teaching strategy to help counselor trainees achieve the foundations consistent with successful counseling practices.

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