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Learning to advocate: Evaluating a new course

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Abstract:

The authors share the formative evaluation of a counseling elective, Social Justice Advocacy. Researchers used thematic analysis to code student weekly reflection journals. Emergent themes included (a) redefining social justice and advocacy, (b) reflecting on privilege, (c) expanding from advocacy for to advocacy with, and (d) shifting into action. The findings have implications for counselor educators interested in developing a similar course and value for professional counselors who wish to improve their advocacy for clients.

Keywords: advocacy | course evaluation | social justice

Article:

Introduction

In an increasingly diverse society in the United States, discrimination and systemic bias have implications for many clients' mental health and well-being (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008). Thus, counselor educators' attention to developing counselors in trainings' client advocacy competence is warranted. Counselors acknowledge multicultural competence, social justice, and advocacy as integral to their profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015); however, counselor educators need models for implementing pedagogical strategies aimed at directly increasing advocacy skills. Social justice is commonly defined as a goal and, simultaneously, a process with two overarching aims: individual and distributive justice (Chang et al., 2010; Crethar et al., 2008). Advocacy, on the other hand, is proactive action with or on behalf of clients meant to move closer to social justice goals and address environmental barriers that impact clients' mental health and well-being (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Crethar et al., 2008). Both social justice and advocacy should be practiced from a foundation of multicultural competence (Fickling & Gonzalez, 2016; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Counselors and other helping professionals advocate in many ways (e.g., client empowerment, engagement with community, critical consciousness-raising) to achieve social justice (Lewis et al., 2002; Ratts et al., 2015).

Counselor training programs also acknowledge these ideals (Gess, 2016). Aligned with the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards, every accredited counselor education program must include models of multicultural counseling, social justice, and advocacy throughout the curriculum. Moreover, the recently published Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCCs) (Ratts et al., 2015) provide a detailed outline of the competencies needed to engage in culturally competent practice and social justice advocacy. Limited scholarship exists that elucidates *how* counselor training programs may best prepare their students to engage in advocacy for and with clients to facilitate social justice (Nilsson, Schale, & Khamphakdy-Brown, 2011; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010; Steele, 2008; Williams, Greenleaf, Barnes, & Owens, 2016). Indeed, the authors of the MSJCCs have been actively soliciting colleagues to consider ways to implement the model in training and practice (S. Nassar-McMillan, personal communication, October 8, 2015). This represents an important theory-to-practice gap that we hope to address in a preliminary way by sharing the formative evaluation of a new advocacy elective course we developed and taught.

Such evidence on effective training practices is needed. Findings suggest that training programs can be instrumental in ensuring that counselors are equipped to offer culturally responsive services (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2008; Miller et al., 2009; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Vespia, Fitzpatrick, Fouad, Kantamneni, & Chen, 2010). Moreover, research indicates that training experiences can be associated with multicultural counseling self-efficacy (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2008), social justice advocacy competence (Crook, Stenger, & Gesselman, 2015), and counseling trainees' engagement in community and societal advocacy (Decker, 2013). Despite a professional commitment to social justice and advocacy in counseling and extant evidence that training programs and coursework may facilitate practitioner competence in these areas, there is limited evidence on the pedagogical efforts that generate social justice advocacy competence (Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Steele, 2008). While some general pedagogical strategies exist (e.g., Donald & Moro, 2014; Gess, 2016; Steele, 2008), few studies demonstrate whether and how students develop advocacy mind-sets or skills as a result of their experience in counseling courses (Williams et al., 2016). The present study will address that gap by describing our course development and initial evaluation process, which may contribute to scholarship that illuminates effective pedagogical strategies that educators may utilize to develop students' social justice and advocacy attitudes and skills.

Social justice and advocacy in counselor training programs

Counselor educators are called to pay attention to social justice issues in counseling programs and are tasked with the role of training aspiring counselors to be social justice advocates (Goodman et al., 2004; Manis, 2012). However, this is only beginning to be implemented in counselor training programs (Pieterse et al., 2009). Pieterse et al. (2009) reviewed approaches in multicultural counseling competence and social justice training using a data-driven analysis of course syllabi from accredited psychology and counseling training programs. Through an analysis of social justice content, they found that although several syllabi focused on social justice, there was not a clear distinction between multiculturalism and social justice constructs. Additionally, even when syllabi centered on social justice constructs, they were inconsistently represented. For example, some syllabi focused on various types of social injustices, whereas others highlighted counselors' advocacy roles and social change practices (Pieterse et al., 2009).

Based on the review, Pieterse et al. (2009) concluded that counselor education and counseling psychology programs are still learning to address social justice and advocacy as core elements of training. Their review suggests that there is limited discussion on social justice issues and few textbooks focusing on social justice counseling and advocacy. Presently, most programs offer a mandatory multicultural counseling course, but these courses may not address issues pertaining to social justice issues such as power, privilege, and oppression (Motulsky, Gere, Saleem, & Trantham, 2014). There are few counselor training programs that infuse social justice issues across the curriculum on the master's and doctoral level (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014), and there are even fewer programs that offer a stand-alone social justice and advocacy course (Motulsky et al., 2014). Despite efforts to include social justice in multicultural counseling courses (CACREP, 2016), and the abundance of literature on social justice definitions, competencies, and theoretical frameworks, it is vital for educators to advocate for a more distinct emphasis on social justice principles in accordance with the current CACREP standards (Pieterse et al., 2009). In addition, counselor educators could benefit from learning about pedagogical approaches that integrate social justice and advocacy competencies across the curriculum (Motulsky et al., 2014).

Suggested pedagogical principles that inform social justice learning

What should social justice education and learning look like? According to Motulsky et al. (2014), social justice training should help trainees develop an understanding of the obstacles, challenges, and stressors that impact underserved and underprivileged populations. Trainees should possess the requisite skills and knowledge to advocate for and help empower clients on the institutional and systemic levels (Motulsky et al., 2014). Adams (2016) outlined six pedagogical principles to teach social justice: (a) develop and sustain a learning environment that is inviting and inclusive, with a consistent set of norms and guidelines; (b) help trainees develop an understanding of how oppression functions on several levels by creating opportunities for them to acknowledge their manifold intersecting positions within systems of inequality; (c) prepare, recognize, and strike a balance between the affective and cognitive elements of social justice issues; (d) utilize participants' knowledge, personal experiences, and interactions to explain and converse social justice topics; (e) encourage teamwork among participants and the active participation in discussion topics; and (f) develop and assess knowledge and skills attained, personal awareness, and action-planning processes that foster change. Of note, Adams's principles can be applied in counseling as well as in other disciplines.

Manis (2012) surveyed the literature and found support for using the critical pedagogical approach to increase trainees' social consciousness and cultivate social justice advocacy. The highly valued practices of critical pedagogy are reflection, conversations, and promotion of trainees' growth in terms of critical consciousness and their role as change agents (Manis, 2012).

Taken together, these practices support instructors and students in navigating the interaction between privilege and oppression, scaffolding trainees as they develop critical consciousness and make meaning of their personal experiences, as well as offering opportunities for experiential activities at the individual client, community, and public policy levels (Manis, 2012). With these recommendations in mind, our team approached the task of designing a new course to engage students in understanding social justice and building advocacy attitudes and skills.

Course design

The authors used the MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) to inform the design of a new, graduate-level, three-hour elective counseling course entitled Social Justice Advocacy in the Community. The course was not limited to students admitted to the counseling program but was open to any graduate student interested in developing their advocacy skills. The MSJCCs are both a set of competencies and a conceptual framework that takes into account intersecting identity categories, privilege and oppression, and a socioecological perspective (Ratts et al., 2015). The framework recognizes the developmental nature of competence, which starts internally with self-awareness of attitudes and knowledge and expands outward to effective interventions and skills. Because we had both counselors and noncounselors in the class, we did not assume advanced helping skills but took the developmental perspective of the MSJCCs.

The course was developed collaboratively by doctoral students and a faculty sponsor in a newly formed social justice research group in a Counselor Education department. All coauthors were members of this research group at various points in time. Group members spent a semester engaging with one another and thinking through the complex ideas behind social justice in planning the course as well as identifying community partners with whom to engage in service learning, due to our interest in the theory to practice connection. The establishment of nonhierarchical relationships was emphasized both in the planning team and in the classroom implementation of activities.

The course learning objectives were based on the MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) and then translated into assignments and course activities (see the appendix for a sample from the syllabus). In addition to the weekly reflection journal assignment, students were required to complete immersion hours with community-based immigrant advocacy groups and complete and present an advocacy action plan related to a population or issue of interest to the students.

During in-class activities, the instructors emphasized self-exploration, personal learning from role models and first-person narratives, and models/tools for the practice of advocacy. For example, students were given the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment Survey (Ratts & Ford, 2010) and used self-disclosure to share some of their personal strengths (e.g., creativity, writing, leadership) and how those might be utilized as advocacy skills. This form of self-awareness also allowed students to move past any initial fears and doubts about their ability to be "an Advocate," as they refocused on describing their own style and capability in advocacy.

Due to the community-based approach to the class, the students engaged in service learning with immigrant-serving community agencies, and key community members were invited to speak in the classroom. First-person narratives shared in class included an immigrant/refugee advocate describing her work, a panel of immigrants and sojourners describing their adjustment in the United States, and a required text about a youth crossing into the United States without documents (Nazario, 2007). These opportunities to learn directly and personally about our population of interest were intended to promote student growth in knowledge, awareness, and skills.

The present study

The goal of this article is to share an initial formative evaluation of a new graduate-level elective course on social justice advocacy. Because the course grew out of a research group, our data collection and evaluation plan was systematically included in the course development process and was intentionally linked to our research question. The researchers used the illuminative evaluation framework (Gordon, 1991) to help define the study and the types of data needed. In contrast to more positivistic, reductive, or experimental approaches to course evaluation, illuminative evaluation has the goal to both describe the course experience from various points of view and to paint a portrait of the experience as a whole. The team chose to collect student weekly reflection journals as qualitative data, given the goal to understand pre- and postcourse perceptions of social justice and advocacy competence, as well as the process of learning and change. Through this evaluation, we sought to answer the research question: What changes did students experience in their thoughts, feelings, and understandings of themselves as advocates through participation in the course?

The research question was answered through thematic analysis of the weekly student journal entries, in response to prompts that were formulated in an intentional way to encourage reflection about changes in thoughts, feelings, and self-concept as an advocate (see the appendix). Because of the exploratory nature of the research question and the desire to seek a broad understanding of the learning environment, illuminative evaluation (Gordon, 1991; Melton & Zimmer, 1987) was an appropriate strategy to design this qualitative study. The data analysis was accomplished via thematic analysis, a qualitative coding method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Method

Participants

Four out of the six enrolled graduate students (given the pseudonyms Beth, Charlie, Theresa, and Roxy) consented to participate in this IRB-approved research project. The participants will be described in aggregate to protect confidentiality. Three students were White/Caucasian, and one was Black/African American. Of the four students, one was enrolled in the College of Arts & Sciences, one in the School of Health & Human Sciences, and two in the School of Education (Counseling Department); however, all were planning for human service professions and interested in increasing their advocacy skills with clients. All four participants indicated that they had little or some previous exposure to social justice advocacy. Participants ranged from 23 to 43 years old (mean age = 33). In the results section, female pronouns will be used, since three participants identified as female and one did not specify gender identity in the demographic form.

Research team and methodology

The course was team-taught by four coinstructors from the research group (coauthors) who positioned themselves not as experts in the class hierarchy but as members of the learning community. Coinstructors planned the material collaboratively and rotated taking responsibility for class topics, so often there were two cofacilitators present on a given day to include diverse perspectives and role models in instructors. The teaching team consisted of a White female, a White male, a Black female, and an Asian female. None of the instructors had prior experience teaching a course in advocacy, but all had written and/or conducted research in multiculturalism and social justice.

The collection and coding of student journals was conducted by the first two authors only. Both are White females, and both were faculty members at the time of the study. One was employed at the university where the course was offered and was a coinstructor, and the other was an alumna of the university but employed at a different institution and had no role in the teaching of the course. In terms of positionality as researchers, the first author had a B.A. in Women's Studies in addition to her Counseling degrees and is a bilingual researcher with expertise in immigrant/refugee populations. The second author is a White, first-generation college graduate with a doctoral cognate in Women's and Gender Studies as part of her Counseling degree. Her research interests include advocacy competence among counselors.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic method because it is a flexible qualitative tool that can be applied across various epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal in this case was to identify and report patterns across the entire data set with some general organization by the researchers based on the goals of the research. The analysis took a deductive approach, meaning the coding of the data was bounded by the course structure and the journal assignment prompts. The study also utilized a realist paradigm, whereby the words of the students were not interpreted to construct meanings beyond what was written but honored the literal meanings of the words written in the journals (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Instrumentation

The student reflection journal assignment was the source of data to answer the research question. Five journal prompts were written by the course development team (see the appendix) to capture awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions (per the MSJCCs). Each student completed these weekly journals during the summer course. Instructors also were asked to journal critical incidents/notable growth for the students and impactful moments in their own experience of the course each week. These instructor journals were not coded, as they were not directly relevant to the research question, but they did serve to validate, triangulate, and expand upon the class experiences described by students. They also served an important function in facilitating instructor self-awareness by encouraging ongoing reflection during the course.

Procedure

After receiving IRB approval but before the course began, the second author, who was not an instructor of the course, sent an e-mail to all six enrolled students to invite them to participate in the study. The second author handled all recruitment and data collection tasks to separate research from teaching tasks and maximize participant confidentiality. Students received an informed consent document via Qualtrics and completed a brief demographic form. The informed consent document explained that participating in the study would include no extra work in class. Four students consented to have their five reflection journals included in the study (for a total of 20 entries), but all six enrolled students followed the same procedures for submitting their journal assignments for course credit (i.e., submit electronically to the second author, who deidentified and assigned a case number and then shared the journals with the course instructors anonymously). This meant the journal entries were blinded to the first author for grading and coding. In the case where students chose to share information in their journals that revealed their identities, the first author disregarded that additional information in terms of the research and focused only on content.

At the conclusion of the semester and after final grades had been entered, the first and second authors utilized thematic analysis (TA) guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the student journal data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe the data analysis process in TA as having six phases: (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The coders (first two authors) read the journals at least two times each, then generated independent lists of codes to represent the most basic elements of the data (e.g., "greater insight into self," or "hearing others' stories"). After sharing those initial impressions, the coders moved to generating themes (e.g., "reflecting on privilege and oppression"), which are broader than the coded segments of data, collecting relevant data under each theme, making sure that the themes were internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was accomplished by comparing the final themes generated by each coder and creating a consensus version and then comparing that to the raw data to ensure a fit. Finally, the third, fourth, and fifth authors provided feedback regarding the clarity and veracity of the final themes. No concerns were raised at that point; thus the authors moved into the final step of the TA, producing the final report. These results follow.

Results

Regarding the ways in which students' thoughts, feelings, and understandings of themselves as advocates changed over the five weeks of the course, student journals were reflective of the following four themes: (a) defining and redefining social justice and advocacy, (b) reflecting on privilege and oppression, (c) expanding from advocacy for to advocacy with, and (d) moving from thinking and reading to doing.

Defining and redefining social justice and advocacy

Initial definitions of social justice and advocacy were informed by personal experiences of injustice, prior advocacy work, and academic exposure to social justice-related theories shared primarily in the first journal entries, due at the start of the first class meeting. Participants were aware that their existing ideas about how to define social justice were incomplete, which motivated them to take the course. Participants appeared to redefine social justice and advocacy across the semester. These definitions seemed to shift from being a monolithic, abstract goal to consisting of achievable, small steps one can take in everyday life. Redefining social justice also meant setting aside stereotyped ideas about what advocacy is.

Beth wrote, “Advocacy should be a verb, and I expect that, as a part of this course, I will benefit from starting to take action and learning the steps for social justice advocacy.” Through her prior training and work she

> learned that being an advocate does not have to be difficult and time-consuming, but that it does have to be an active role. Simply going to the trainings and learning about sensitive language and struggles that are specific to the population of choice is not enough.

This participant came to the course with the explicit goal of expanding her definition of social justice advocacy.

Theresa wrote, “My current definition of social justice advocacy is pretty fuzzy,” stating that she took the class to “learn practical methods of actually doing social justice work.” She wrote, “I definitely do not have a clear idea of how one becomes a productive activist” but that she was “a big believer that even small acts can have a domino effect of change.” Later in the semester she wrote, “I tend to want to find quick, pragmatic solutions to all problems, and unfortunately, social justice does not always offer simple, straightforward answers to complicated problems.” This captured the way in which most students came to more complex and nuanced definitions of social justice and advocacy during the five-week course.

The sense of redefining social justice advocacy was captured by Charlie, who wrote:

> Often social justice advocacy can carry a connotation of a fierce social justice warrior fighting large, governmental institutions, rebelling against oppressive power sources, and, ultimately, changing legislation and policy. However, sometimes social justice advocacy necessitates one to follow the rules of an institution. Being subversive is so imperative, but in some cases, one must respect forms of power and work within their rules to bring about positive change.

Overall, participants shifted from an *either-or* orientation to social justice and advocacy to a *both-and* way of viewing the work.

Reflecting on privilege and oppression

All students shared having done some previous work on exploring their own privileges and experiences of being oppressed, but through course readings and discussions, they came to additional ways of understanding these processes. Participants seemed to move to more complex understandings of the identities and experiences of their target populations and also of immigrants and refugees. Beth wrote, “This class has helped call attention to a privilege that I was less previously aware of: my status as a natural-born citizen.”

Charlie had particularly salient reflections on privilege, stating that “being cognizant of one’s privilege is essential, especially when the advocate is advocating ‘for’ a group or person.” Around midsemester, she wrote: “As social justice advocates, we need to develop a sense of who we are individually as racialized, sexualized, socialized, and gendered people; the process is reliant on personal, internal work.” This can be particularly challenging because: “Being aware of privilege is a constant endeavor, partly because we often do not realize it when we receive it, but also because it can change in various scenarios.”

Expanding from “advocacy for” to “advocacy with”

Although some students started the course with an abstract awareness that advocacy is ideally done *with* those we wish to empower, it seemed that this key component of advocacy became internalized for students during the course. Students identified collaboration, cultural competence, use of voice, and a strengths focus as key factors in effective advocacy *with*.

Participants seemed to have some of the most impactful and unexpected insights around the role of collaboration and relationships with other advocates. They quickly came to see relationships, both in-class and in-community, as central to advocacy. Beth perhaps summarized this best: “Collaboration is what makes advocacy do-able.” She went on to write, “One of the biggest pieces of knowledge that I will be taking away from this class is the idea that advocacy has to be community-centered and based.” Beth also wrote, “I believe that we have formed the basis for strong partnerships in advocacy. Advocacy is not done alone, and I plan to turn to my classmates and professors for guidance and assistance in my future and current advocacy efforts.” Charlie also wrote about her classmates, “Collaborating with them—sometimes even in quiet ways—has been my favorite part of this course.”

In some ways, finding one’s voice as an advocate was the thing that allowed for connection. Charlie wrote:

> When I reflect back over this course, collaboration stands out as a concept because of the connections I have made to people within the class. I spoke, utilizing my voice, and made connections, but I also used my voice to make connections without necessarily speaking: I listened, showed support, and encouraged.

On the same theme of voice, Beth wrote, “Advocacy should be an amplification of those voices with whom you wish to advocate rather than a loud speaker over those voices.” She wrote, “I must learn then to give up some of the responsibility and let others help to lead the projects and ideas that I have.”

Three participants highlighted cultural competence as something they needed to continue to develop to effectively work with other advocates. Roxy wrote: “The class has enhanced my knowledge to look deeper than the first few layers of one’s surface. By learning one’s culture, lifestyle, and way of life, these qualities help to strengthen relationships with others who are different than ourselves.”

Finally, the strengths and assets focus of the class helped students frame advocacy as ideally done *with* groups rather than *for* them. Charlie wrote that focusing exclusively on needs rather than assets "is a trap for advocates" because people and communities become "defined by what they lack." Regarding this strengths and assets focus of advocacy, Beth wrote: "Focusing on what the community being affected has to contribute and is doing well can be *so* powerful in making change." She added, "People want you to share in their community and listen to their stories. In that sense, the best way to prepare yourself for social justice advocacy is to *learn* from the people affected."

Moving from thinking and reading to doing

Students expressed a desire to learn how to *do* social justice. Roxy succinctly communicated a shared stance of all participants by stating that she took the course to "learn more about how to use social justice for all people." Student journals indicated real movement in this direction. This included applying tools from class to real-world settings and transforming personal experiences into insight/strength as advocates.

The introduction of models and advocacy tools helped students make the connection between theory and practice. The tools that were mentioned most frequently by the students were the community partnerships model (Bryan & Henry, 2012) and some resources related to community asset mapping (Dorfman, 1998). These tools were general enough that each of our students (from a variety of academic disciplines) could adapt them to their future work setting.

Though initially concerned about the unintended consequences of her intense passion, Theresa wrote that her "compassion and willingness to confront unpleasant issues" would be her strength as an advocate. She came to see her "impatience and anger" as strengths "only if [they are] mitigated by open-mindedness and understanding that there is much I don't know and have not experienced and that change takes time and cooperation."

Around the middle of the semester, Beth wrote about her desire to move to action stating, "Theories are useful, but it is awareness that leads to advocacy." Charlie echoed this sentiment, writing, "I think there needs to be a balance between theory and the mobilization of students to apply certain principles to community outreach. My need for this balance is one of the main reasons I am taking this class."

Finally, students communicated that they had continued working on their individual advocacy projects beyond their time in the course. One instructor noted in a final journal entry,

> I was impressed by the final products that the students came up with in this course. It seems like by the end of the course that many of them understood a lot better about how to create a social justice advocacy plan. Their enthusiasm and passion for their plans was contagious too. The students also really seemed to take to heart the information gathering part of their plan and wanting to build relationships in the community before diving right into action. I was impressed and surprised by how many of them wanted to carry out their plans and were taking steps to do that.

Discussion

This purpose of this study was to evaluate whether students experienced changes in their thoughts, feelings, and understandings of themselves as advocates through participation in a new social justice advocacy course. First, we described the course design and evaluation process so that future counselor educators can make improvements and hopefully continue to translate the MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) into course material. Our course development process incorporated the majority of the pedagogical principles stated by Adams (2016), including (a) creating a learning environment that reflects trust and inclusivity, (b) helping trainees personalize their view of how oppression functions in their lives and others, (c) balancing the affective and cognitive elements of social justice issues, (d) drawing on participants' knowledge and personal experiences, (e) encouraging collaboration and active participation, and (f) developing an advocacy action plan to foster change. Second, thematic analysis of student journals provided documentation that the competencies addressed in class (e.g., knowledge, attitudes, skills, and ability to act) translated to some degree into advocacy actions for communities.

The service-learning component of the course was essential in strengthening the theory to practice connection and helping students build their advocacy skills in a stepwise fashion, consistent with existing research (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Nilsson et al., 2011). The direct experiences students had with our service-learning partners early in the course provided mastery experiences that empowered students and challenged some of their anxious thoughts. The service-learning cycle of doing and critically reflecting was a key aspect of the students' learning (Manis, 2012). By the end of the course, students had developed a more nuanced definition of advocacy that was fueled by their experiences of defining and redefining advocacy, their role as an advocate taking part in collaborative social justice work, and the examples of their peers.

As evidenced by participants' limited definitions of advocacy in their initial journals, part of the difficulty with learning to utilize client advocacy skills is the large scale and aspirational quality of the concepts (Roysicar, 2009). Contributing to a just world is an admirable goal, but many counselors in training feel intimidated as they contemplate the first step in the journey (Bemak & Chung, 2008). However, by the end of the course, participants in this study had shifted to a place of empowered action and strengths-based collaboration, which is one goal of the MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) and a key insight for other instructors interested in using the new competencies. This change seemed to be facilitated largely by critical reflection (Manis, 2012) and social learning strategies, including providing models for vicarious learning, offering verbal encouragement, helping students take initial steps to feel a sense of mastery, and providing a forum to discuss anxieties about advocacy, thus reducing them (Bandura, 1989). For example, the first-person narratives of our guest speakers modeled for the students that advocacy could be as simple and tangible as sitting down at a kitchen table to hear a person's concerns.

We extended the counseling literature in some ways (building on Griffin & Farris, 2010) from social work and community development. This tool generated excitement in the course and also helped students see the distinction between "advocacy with" and "advocacy for." This shift is meaningful because moving into a stance of "advocacy with" requires us to interrogate our privilege and no longer consider our community partners to be solely characterized by disadvantage or neediness. As we understand it, advocacy with other human beings respects their capacity to understand and respond to their situation and empowers them as equal problem solvers (Ratts et al., 2015). While there are moments when “advocacy for” may be a better option (e.g., speaking for undocumented immigrants at risk of deportation), the students came to prefer “advocacy with.”

Implications for instructors

Understanding students’ developmental processes as advocates and being intentional about scaffolding their new skills can be critical to fostering their growth. Manis (2012) argued that learning client advocacy follows a developmental model where students must understand social justice issues before using this knowledge to act to empower themselves and others. The MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) are valuable to help frame both a starting place (knowledge and attitudes) and a stepwise progression into more active and engaged interactions. We tried to follow this sequencing in our weekly course topics, our journal entries, and the flow of activities in each class period.

With the focus on developmental scaffolding, our goal to create an inclusive classroom environment that emphasized that open dialogue was important for helping students feel comfortable sharing their values and experiences. Establishing ground rules and guidelines helped establish a learning environment where students were able to be vulnerable with one another (Adams, 2016). The course instructors also fostered instructor-student relationships that were egalitarian and collaborative and that modeled genuine self-disclosure. For example, the course instructors shared some personal experiences as advocates or as a sojourner in the United States.

The importance of focusing on the affective side of advocacy work (Adams, 2016), including linking social justice knowledge with social justice self-efficacy and empathy for others (Miller et al., 2009), is another implication of our findings. Instructors of advocacy courses can be intentional about unpacking their students’ emotional experiences surrounding advocacy and creating spaces for students to express these feelings in the class. Additionally, helping students avoid discouragement by managing outcome expectations (e.g., advocacy takes time, and every step forward is valuable) reframes setbacks as learning opportunities.

Finally, using the experiential cycle of doing and reflecting helped students transform their values into action (Manis, 2012) in a way that allowed for the authentic expression of their unique disciplinary backgrounds and strengths. Our course involved numerous components where students were able to reflect including journals, group discussion, and social justice stories from peers, instructors, community members, and immigrants. These reflections were mixed with numerous opportunities for doing, including experiential class activities, service learning, and developing and carrying out their advocacy plans. Students in our course grew a tremendous amount from this interplay of doing and reflecting, often using their reflection to shift their approach to advocacy from class to class. Utilizing their previous knowledge and experiences also helped students translate and understand social justice topics (Adams, 2016). Students often shared the ways they had integrated their reflection into their advocacy. Taken together, these results affirm existing scholarship regarding specific factors that contribute to the development of advocacy competence and extend the knowledge base by providing initial evidence of the validity of the MSJCC framework for course development (Ratts et al., 2015).

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this course evaluation include the small number of participants and the fact that several academic disciplines were represented in the classroom, which limits the extent to which we can generalize our findings. In the spirit of advocating "with not for," having long-term reciprocal community partnerships could help future instructors of advocacy courses engage consistently and respectfully. In terms of future research questions, the course activities and structures that helped counseling students grow (cognitively and affectively) as advocates could be identified more specifically, which could illuminate approaches and techniques for instructors to consider. The MSJCCs (Ratts et al., 2015) are still fairly new in our profession in terms of cycles of curriculum change or course development. Further research could examine how the MSJCC framework could be used to frame effective course assignments, focus clinical supervision interactions, and influence client outcomes, or how the social justice climate of a department might change with the infusion of these competencies across courses or within a specific course. Some of this early adoption of the MSJCC framework may be occurring, but until it is published and accessible, we will not be able to share ideas and best practices as a professional community. To this end, we offer our small contribution.

Conclusion

Teaching advocacy with/for clients in a way that is community engaged and extends beyond the classroom is important. Traditional college teaching, where students rarely interact with others outside of their course, does not model the possibilities for counseling-based advocacy and can fall short of social justice goals. It is the authors' hope that the pedagogical strategies used in developing and teaching this course may inspire other counseling instructors to incorporate more innovative approaches to teaching that are congruent with their values as advocates and the MSJCCs. Research on new curricular approaches such as this are necessary to address the relative lack of social justice and advocacy pedagogy in the current counseling literature. Exposure to these activities can empower students to be proactive change agents in their personal and professional lives. In the words of one of the students (Charlie),

> The image of the "social justice warrior" extrovertly speaking and confronting powerful institution-systems has diminished significantly in this class. There are strengths I possess; these constitute the numerous ways for me to effectively take on an advocate role and utilize my voice, even by being quiet.

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Appendix: Portions of course syllabus

CED 688: Social Justice Advocacy in the Community: A Counseling-Based Approach

(3 credit elective for graduate students in helping professions)

Course objectives

We will have immediate learning objectives for the five-week summer term and also hope to encourage students to adopt some longer-term personal learning objectives for continued community advocacy. Students will need to understand that effective advocacy cannot occur in the space of a five-week summer session and will hopefully consider what their role could be moving forward in their academic and professional journey.

Learning objectives

Drawn from the new Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) from the American Counseling Association:

- Explore our own attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and ability to act (abbreviated as AKSA) in three developmental domains (self-awareness, worldview of others, and helping relationships).
- Deepen our understanding of the role of power, privilege, and oppression as they influence the way society is organized and our ability to interact effectively with others; explore the meaning of "acting with" versus "acting for" other groups.
- Explore the multiple and intersecting aspects of our own social experiences and identity statuses (e.g., race/ethnicity, culture, country of origin, gender, sex, sexual orientation, social class, language, legal status, etc.), and how that may influence our worldviews, values, beliefs, and experiences of oppression or marginality.
- Practice some basic attending/helping skills that can be useful in opening a conversation and learning about the worldviews of others (e.g., building trust, verbal and nonverbal communication, reflecting content and affect, asking open-ended questions, generating a working alliance).
- Explore our AKSA about vulnerable groups through the social justice advocacy action plan exercise and identify ways we can function as advocates with such groups in a sustained manner moving forward.
- Identify several levels on which advocates may choose to act, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, policy, and global interventions.
- Operationalize or personalize our understanding of social identities and worldviews by having firsthand contact with persons who are refugees or immigrants to this country.
- Incorporate culturally competent community needs assessment and a feedback loop as vital steps in socially just advocacy (collaborating with local immigrant and refugee-serving agencies).
- Explore the MSJCC model and other texts in class while using critical thinking skills to question the assumptions of these definitions and models for practice/implementation.

Course requirements

REFLECTION JOURNAL (40 POINTS EACH = 200 POINTS TOTAL). This series of five journal prompts encourages students to explore their levels of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills as it relates to course process and content. Each journal entry will be two to three typed pages long (double spaced) and will be submitted electronically via Box. These reflections will be most useful to you if they are genuine, not if you are trying to manage the impression you are making. You will receive all points for turning in a complete journal entry, so you can feel free to use the space for honest self-exploration.

- Journal #1: Why did you choose to sign up for this summer course, and what are your expectations for how it will be useful to you (personally or professionally)? What is your current definition of social justice advocacy? What types of experiences are informing your current definition? (*Due as your entry ticket to first class*)
- Journal #2: What has learning about social justice advocacy in the course so far made you think of yourself and your areas of social privilege or oppression? Of your situated identity in your community? What attitudes and beliefs do you have that might hinder your ability to become an advocate?
- Journal #3: In what ways has your knowledge around (a) the process of preparing for social justice advocacy and (b) the lived experiences of immigrant/refugee populations in our community changed as a result of being in the class? What experiences in or outside of class in particular stand out to you (were especially useful in bringing about that new knowledge)?
- Journal #4: What emerging skills and strengths do you possess that will help you in fulfilling an individual or systems level community advocacy role? What skills and strengths do you still want to develop?
- Journal #5: Please identify and describe in some detail three things you have learned in this class that will improve your capacity to serve as an advocate for a social justice issue that is important to you. Please also describe anything that remains unclear for you or creates an obstacle (internal/external) when it comes to functioning in an advocate role.

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