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## Creating the Optimum Classroom Environment in Counselor Education: Using Group Leadership Skills

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#### **Abstract**

Most counselor educators are not trained in teaching, but many possess group facilitation skills. Counselor educators can capitalize on these skills and intentionally strive to provide an optimal learning environment in the classroom utilizing the basic concepts and techniques applied in group leadership. The following article suggests applying a group work perspective to inform a pedagogical approach when teaching graduate level counseling courses.

Most counselor educators have minimal, if any, teacher training (Phelps, 2010), but many counselor educators do have training and experience in group leadership. Counselor educators can bring elements of their training in group dynamics to their classrooms as a means of classroom "management" and as a strategy for facilitating active engagement in the learning process. Rather than simply being deliverers of information to passive groups of students, counselor educators can use their group leadership skills and characteristics to become dynamic classroom managers and facilitators.

Fundamental group leadership skills transformed into a pedagogical framework can foster student engagement and, as a result, has the potential to improve students' active and dynamic learning outcomes. Effective group leaders are able to emphasize the group process as well as guide members to focus on content (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 1998; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Erford, 2010; Geroski & Kraus, 2010). Effective counselor educators capitalizing on group leadership skills can facilitate the active and dynamic learning process as well as disseminate content required for their courses. A group leadership lens contains overarching objectives that promote student and group members' learning, growth, and development.

The current literature on doctoral level counselor education training indicate that one key limitation of most training programs is the lack of emphasis and preparation given to teaching at the college level (Orr, Hall, & Hulse-Killacky, 2008; Phelps, 2010), yet many who graduate at this level pursue academia as their primary career. Furthermore,

many master's level counselor preparation programs hire adjunct instructors with master's degrees who often identify as practitioners and not educators. Consequently, most faculty within master's level counselor preparation programs have had limited to no formal training in teaching methods. Group leadership skills provide a pedagogical framework on which counselor educators can rely. This knowledge base blends theory and practical skills and can inform and improve instructors' approaches in the classroom. Characteristics such as leadership, interpersonal style, and attitudes are all contributing factors to the overall effectiveness of the leader of a group (Morran, Stockton, & Bond, 1999). These effective leaders are able to give, receive, and model positive and constructive feedback and combine the talents of "scholar, writer, producer, comedian, entertainer, and teacher in ways that contribute to student learning" (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006, p. 57).

Group leadership skills are ideal in a classroom setting. Among these skills are active listening, summarizing, supporting, empathizing, facilitating, suggesting, protecting, modeling, linking and blocking (ASGW, 1998; Coleman, Kivlighan & Roehlke, 2009; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Erford, 2010; Kivlighan & Tarrant, 2001). Effective group leaders may make the most effective teachers by utilizing group work skills, as opposed to relying on the more traditional 'teacher as expert' approach, which limits student engagement and intellectual development.

In a classroom, instructors can function as group leaders and conceptualize students as group members. Instructors' goals as group leaders move from simply disseminating information to creating a safe environment for learning and exploration, as well as intentionally teaching and modeling appropriate interpersonal behaviors and communication skills. These classroom experiences assist to reinforce behaviors students will use in the field working with both individuals and groups. Learning is multi-dimensional for students through this approach, impacting students both personally and professionally.

Regardless of specialty areas, most graduate counseling courses strive for mastery of content knowledge about counseling and practical application of the skills, techniques, and theories that are introduced. Instruction, when approached as group facilitation, can provide an appropriate and effective blend of building and developing content knowledge with the personal and professional development necessary for counselor efficacy. Group work and counselor training are both centered on increasing self-awareness and efficacy and identifying and expanding self-reflective and interpersonal skills (Crews, et al., 2005; Lent, et al., 2009). Counselor educators can use their group leadership skills to inform counselor training by creating and maintaining a classroom environment that allows students to take risks and develop from dualistic/passive learners to the autonomous critical thinkers they will need to become as professional counselors (Lyons & Hazler, 2002).

## A Developmental Lens

Clients benefit from therapists who use a developmental approach that 'meets them where they are' and that gradually and appropriately challenges them to progress to higher levels of functioning. Likewise, counseling students benefit from instructional approaches that meet them where they are developmentally and that gradually and appropriately challenge them to advance to higher levels of thinking (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). In his classic research, Perry (1970) found that when provided the appropriate environment, college students progress through a series of intellectual changes during their training that represent progressively more complex structures through which students understand their

world. Beginning students typically exhibit initial absolutist thought and dependency on the instructor as authority and advanced students generally engage in increasingly complex and autonomous thinking (Perry, 1970).

Coupling intellectual development level (beginning, middle, and advanced students) with Tuckman's (1965) classic group stages is a helpful way to conceptualize groups of students and their specific needs in each level of training. Tuckman indicated that groups progress through a somewhat predictable set of developmental stages, regardless of facilitator style. He named these stages Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman's Stages of Group Development is the most frequently cited stage model (Tuckman & Jensen, 2010). Each stage involves a (a) a specific group structure or pattern of interpersonal relationships; specific ways members act and relate to each other; and (b) a specific task activity, the content of interaction as related to identified tasks (Tuckman 1965).

A brief review of Tuckman's (1965) Stages of Group Development is warranted. The "forming" stage involves orientation, testing, and dependence; the "storming" stage involves resistance to group influence and task requirements; the "norming" stage involves openness to other group members; the "performing" stage involves constructive action; and the "adjourning" stage involves disengagement (Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman's observations of developmental stages of groups parallel nicely Perry's (1970) observations of developmental stages of individual college students in the classroom. Because such development is predictable in the classroom, counselor educators can capitalize on this phenomenon and provide the appropriate structure and activities to meet students where they are. Additionally, instructors can intentionally introduce activities timed in such a way that allows for progression to higher levels of development. This progression can occur in each individual course (beginning of the semester vs. mid-term vs. final class) and in counseling programs as a whole (introductory classes vs. advanced classes).

For example, in introductory courses, instructors would do well to initially present new material in a lecture format as opposed to assigning student presentations. This is true because at this point in their respective training, students are in the orientation stage of a group and in the initial stages of intellectual development where students value instructor knowledge over peer knowledge (Perry, 1970). Whereas in advanced courses, as students (and the group as a whole) begin to develop and "perform," they will benefit more from peer presentations and self-directed projects; they value peer knowledge at this stage and are becoming less dependent on the instructor. The class gradually becomes a working group, developing cohesion, validating belongingness, and valuing membership from each person (Corey & Corey, 2006). These concepts are central to group work; they may aid promoting intellectual development in classrooms and can be applied to each individual course as well

## **Forming**

Similar to group work, it is helpful for instructors to provide more structure at the beginning of a course in order to reinforce norms and rules, to model adaptive engagement and appropriate interpersonal communication, and to create the safe classroom space desired for optimal group work interactions (Coleman, Kivlighan & Roehlke, 2009; Denver & Karabenick, 2011). Carl Rogers (1951) espoused that when instructors become mentors who guide rather than experts who tell, a student-centered, nonthreatening environment is

fostered. It is within such an environment of unforced learning, that students feel safe to take risks and become highly engaged in the learning process. The ultimate goal is to create such an environment, however, there are initial steps instructors must take in order to set this in motion.

Instructors must keep in mind that during the forming (or orientation) stage, students will be unfamiliar with the expectations in any given course as each course provides a unique experience. Novel situations and unfamiliar people can foster anxiety among many individuals and these are also seen among college students (Perry, 1970; Shepherd & Edelman, 2009). Counselor educators trained in group leadership can draw on these common, universal feelings that many students in the class will be experiencing, although few will be able to verbalize. Instructors can normalize and validate these feelings in this initial experience simply by stating that it is common to feel anxious in the beginning and that there are steps that will be taken to attempt to minimize the anxiety. By taking this intentional step in this first class, instructors will have communicated to the students their commitment to the class as a whole and to each individual student.

During the forming stage of a class, instructors typically orient students by presenting the expectations about the 'interpersonal' and 'task' realms of the course via the course syllabus. Through the presentation of the course syllabus, students will be made aware of the expectations that will be placed upon them and will enter into an agreement with the instructor and peers as to the ground rules of the course. Generally, by the end of the first class meeting, students who were initially anxious and unsure will have become informed and, as a result, more settled and relaxed. This process encourages students to take the first step to actively engage in the class process, paving the way for effective group membership in the class.

An additional goal for instructors during this stage is to assist the students to view the class as a newly formed group. It is not important if students have known each other or worked together in the past. Collectively each semester, they are a new team, a new normal, for the duration of the class. Some examples of topics that the instructor could select in order to prompt a class discussion regarding norms might include having food in class and break times. Many graduate level classes run in the evenings, and many students are coming straight to class from a job; therefore, not all students may have the chance to have a meal before coming to class. If basic needs are not met (e.g., food), it will be more challenging for students to concentrate on a lecture or class exercise. The same is true for graduate students and maintaining active and dynamic engagement in a class, which are typically two or three hours long. Facilitating a discussion that provides an opportunity for students to work together to determine norms gives them a sense of ownership in the class and begins to build the cohesion of a collective group. These are all critical pieces to successful group work.

In addition to introducing the "tasks" of the course, the course instructor, as the group leader, is responsible for laying the groundwork to foster a group climate that supports growth, learning and change (Geroski & Kraus, 2010; Stockton, Morran & Clark, 2004). A group climate (or classroom environment) centered on trust, support and safety provides the necessary environment for the development of group cohesion; an establishment of belonging for all members in the group (Corey & Corey, 2006; Geroski & Kraus, 2010).

## **Storming**

Many counselor educators may feel unprepared for the role of teaching, particularly when many doctoral programs do not emphasize coursework in the art of teaching (Nagle & Suldo, 2004; Orr, et al., 2008). The result of this lack of classroom training is often a feeling of inadequacy and a tendency to fall back on the tradition of the more traditional authoritarian teacher (Dever & Karabenick, 2011; Niles, Akos & Cutler, 2001; Walker, 2008) This 'teacher as expert' approach is antithetical to the creation of a safe, interactive and dynamic learning environment. This is particularly true during the storming stage of group development where defensive and resistance often occur (Tuckman, 1965). Granted, not every student will become defensive and resistant to the process, but an environment that allows egalitarian involvement is one that is more conducive to constructive classroom management. Helping students feel safe while also allowing students to test the limits is a critical facilitative element during the storming stage. During this stage, the more resistant student may act out by disengaging or by testing boundaries that were addressed in the syllabus. For example, a student may submit an assignment late in order to determine whether an instructor will consistently apply consequences for late work or, a student may resist in situations where group work is required. The key to facilitating through this stage is warm but firm consistency on the part of the instructor. Once students observe and experience the instructor holding all students to the same standards, students begin to feel secure. When situations are predictable, anxiety decreases. This stage requires instructors to be mature in their abilities to manage groups; avoiding defensiveness and emotionality is key.

Many students are riddled with anxiety, insecurities and overall negativity. This could be a result of a program stressor (e.g. upcoming comprehensive exam), outside responsibilities (e.g. additional jobs, family stressors) or it may be an intra-personal issue that requires exploration outside of the classroom. Often, a counselor preparation program will uncover issues within students, which they have avoided or of which they were unaware. Through self-exploration and reflection activities, these issues come to light. The classroom is not the place for students to work through their issues, however, it may be the place where issues reveal themselves, and instructors must be prepared to identify and assist students in those instances. The storming stage is the most likely place for these anxieties to reveal themselves.

The most effective leadership involves more facilitation than direction. Facilitation includes both direct prompts to guide the process, but also indirect contributions such as modeling behaviors that are adaptive to the process. The beauty of group work is that group members become responsible for themselves as individuals and as members of an entity larger than themselves. The leader does not instruct them to become this way; it happens because of certain leader characteristics and skills, as well as the development of the groups' members (Tuckman, 1965). In addition, the depth to which members will explore themselves and also engage their peers in the process is a direct result of the engagement, style and skills of the group leader. The same principle can be applied to graduate level counseling courses when considering the learning process and the classroom environment the instructor creates.

Too often, the initial dynamic in classrooms is centered on establishing an authoritative presence by the graduate instructor (Coldren & Hively, 2009; Walker, 2008). The misconception is that by appearing strict, sometimes to the point of intimidation, students will perceive the instructor as expert and thus will 'obey and respect.' The problem

with this approach is that it is not relational and is antithetical of the type of relationship values counselor educators hope to instill in developing counselors. Additionally, when instructors use authority in this way, intellectual development of students is actually inhibited (Coldren & Hively, 2009; Perry, 1970; Walker, 2008). Rather than becoming the independent thinkers professional counselors need to become, students are inadvertently encouraged to rely on authority as all-knowing.

Rogers (1942) encouraged counselors and teachers (1951) to be student-centered. His core conditions of genuineness, empathy, positive regard and congruence are a well-known concept in the field of counseling, but are less applied in the field of teaching. Genuineness, respect and understanding may be considered the cornerstones of the teacher-student relationship, as they have a powerful and positive impact on the learning environment, as well as the teacher-student relationship (Frenzel, Goetz, Ludtke, Pekrun & Sutton, 2009). It is not an authoritative, rigid environment that students need in a classroom, but rather consistent, approachable, empathic facilitation of learning.

Similar to group leaders, instructors should not expect every student to feel comfortable in the initial stages of class in terms of possessing sufficient confidence to actively participate verbally in class discussions. However, intentional, respectful, and developmentally appropriate execution of discussion opportunities will resonate with most students eventually. The foundational elements to classroom and group work success are communication, respect for diversity of thought and collaboration; the instructor can establish and illustrate that his or her classes are forums that will encourage these elements. Students will require sufficient time to get to know each other and establish initial connections before they are able to move forward, just as in the initial stages of group work (DeLucia-Waack, 2006).

Most instructors have experienced the dynamic in one or two or a small group of students have an effect on the entire class. Similar to group dynamics, the effect can be destructive if not managed well by the instructor. Attitudes and behaviors of students can transfer throughout the entire class. Ideally, when managed well by the instructor, the classroom atmosphere creates an energy that captivates, motivates, and encourages dynamic and active learning. This can occur despite having a few students with initial resistance; students who feel safe will take risks in their learning, dig deeper within themselves, and actively engage in the learning process itself.

### Norming

If the instructor successfully navigates students through the storming stage, the group will naturally evolve into a place of safety, mutual support and cooperation known as the norming stage (Tuckman, 1965). Resistance has been addressed and class members have come to an understanding and trust of the process, the group leader, and the group members. Norms have been established and cohesion has developed. Groups develop norms based in part on the members in the group and their interactive dynamics as well as the structure and leadership from the group leader (ASGW, 1998; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Erford, 2010; Geroski & Kraus, 2010; Gladding, 2003; Jacobs, Mason & Havrill, 2002). Individual personalities and interactions among students within each class impact class norms and environment.

While the content may remain similar from semester to semester, especially when the course instructor does not change, counselor educators will notice a drastic difference in the overall course each semester due to the unique composition of the students in the class. This composition impacts the learning environment. If the counselor educator, as the group leader, has created a safe, predictable environment students in the norming stage will more readily engage cooperatively in the learning process regardless of the unique composition. Leadership is critical to the learning process and, if done well, can lead to the optimal environment for the promotion of personal and professional development.

### Performing

Once cohesion has been established and norms are firmly in place, the classroom reaches the stage of performing, where constructive action takes place (Tuckman, 1965). During this stage, the bulk of the work of the class is performed by the students who have developed into more autonomous learners; the students value not only the instructor, but also themselves and their peers as 'knowers' (Lyons & Hazler, 2001; Perry, 1970). At this stage, the instructor can rely less on the traditional "lecture" and more on group projects and presentations. The result of applying group work techniques to counselor education classrooms creates an active and dynamic learning environment. For example, instructors may consider implementing "peer checks" in which students complete assignments individually but have peer editing partners at one or several points in the assignment. Through the use of strategies such as these, peers can be utilized as a resource for information and support throughout the advanced stages of the learning process by building collaborative connections, practicing communication skills, giving and receiving feedback, gaining a sense of responsibility and being accountable to a person other than the instructor. This strategy also serves to reinforce a key element of students being responsible for their learning and training as professional counselor. Through such strategies, students have the opportunity to complete "independent" assignments, which will assist instructors with their goals of preparing each student and will also provide an opportunity for interpersonal collaboration serving multiple purposes. The "team aspect" of this small, intentional modification to a common assignment is merely one example of how the application and infusion of group work techniques can empower students individually while continuing to cultivate cohesion among the class as a whole.

As students develop their stronger sense of being an independent learner, much like in a group process, the instructor becomes more of a facilitator and students begin to trust themselves and their peers as knower's. It is at this point that instructors can 'let go and let the students inform the class direction' so to speak. As the class progresses and the group cohesion solidifies among the students, they can become more active contributors to the class. In some instances, one semester may not be enough time for that group of students to reach these levels of cohesion, trust, and engagement, and thus that moment is not reached in that class. Even if an instructor teaches the same class every semester, each class is a different group of individuals; therefore, each group will reach this desired level of trust and learning at a different point in the semester, if at all. Every group of students will interact differently; therefore, instructors should intentionally plan and be ready and able to make modifications to meet the group where they are at as needed throughout the entire class.

## Adjourning

The final stage of the group development process is adjourning or disengagement (Tuckman, 1965). A semester long course provides a natural opportunity for adjournment which usually involves an exam or some other type of final project designed to synthesize course content. Such projects provide an opportunity for students to experience mastery of the content, but also, ideally, mastery of the interpersonal relationships that were developed and maintained through the facilitative skills of the instructor and by the cohesiveness of the group. Through this process, students will have not only mastered content, but also will have matured into higher functioning members of the counseling program community.

Regardless of which final project occurs, instructors can use a portion of the last class meeting as an intentional "wrap-up" session so that students have an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in both the group structure and group tasks realms. Such sessions would occur only after formal evaluations have been completed so that students feel free to express themselves. Throughout the semester and throughout graduate school, there is always the power differential due to the evaluative nature of the role of instructor. Due to this power differential, some students may not ever reach the point of complete safety. Regardless of this inherent power differential, instructors can still strive to create a safe learning environment where students feel free to take risks and push themselves to the next level of development. The leaders that make this happen are those who approach classrooms from a place of maturity and ego strength; where defensiveness is kept to a minimum, if present at all, and the goal is mutual understanding and growth. Effective counselors have the potential to be the most effective teachers when they are coming from this place of heightened awareness.

#### Conclusion

Counselor education training is diverse among specialty degree programs at the master's level (e.g., Mental Health Counseling, School Counseling, Rehabilitation Counseling, Student Affairs Counseling). Overall, the graduate training in counselor preparation and counselor education is vastly different than other graduate programs housed within the same school or college within institutions. The counselor preparation program focuses more heavily on intra and interpersonal development and clinical skill building, which is often not found in other graduate programs that will focus more heavily on content knowledge. Even within counselor training programs a distinction is seen among counseling master's and doctoral degree programs. It is in part this distinction that allows for the clear relevance of applying group work leadership skills and techniques as an intentional pedagogical approach in the graduate classrooms.

There are important parallels between group work processes, structure, and techniques and counselor education classrooms, including the general stages of the process, the importance on self-awareness and self-reflection as well as the impact that the peers and instructor can have on the individuals learning whether that be direct or indirect. Counseling faculty who are mindful about this parallel are able to prepare and construct their classrooms in a manner that fosters collaboration, self-reflection, growth and development. Counselor education graduate programs can encourage this intentional development as a part of their programs as well, thereby proactively impacting future faculty. Infusing group work techniques, structures, and processes in the collegiate classroom is something that can be helpful for students at any stage of their training; the anticipated outcomes will improve and contribute to strengthening student-student relationships as well as student-

teacher relationships within a class, and possibly a department. These efforts encourage and foster active and dynamic autonomous learners, which is an element of success in higher education, as well as in the world.

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