

Humanistic Pedagogy in Online Counselor Education

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Abstract

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Introduction

Online counselor education is replete with both challenges and opportunities. With virtually every counselor educator occupying the digital space either temporarily, due to COVID, or more permanently, due to program delivery decisions, it is essential to consider the manner in which our discipline engages in online education.

Humanistic pedagogy is a new term being explored by the Association for Humanistic Counseling (AHC) to help identify how we, as counselor educators, can develop educational opportunities that are humane, compassionate, and humanistic in their approach. Given the parallels with the profession of counseling, humanistic pedagogy seems a reasonable approach to the teaching and training of counselors.

What is Humanistic Pedagogy?

According to the AHC, “Humanistic counselors base their practice upon a philosophical foundation based on the affirmation of the dignity of every human being (2022).” By allowing the dignity of the person receiving services to be the lead principle, counselors approach their work with a focus on autonomy, openness, and genuineness to meet clients at their point of need. We believe this foundation is applicable to higher education as well. Students enter graduate school with a desire to learn the art and science of counseling, but with the natural anxiety that is experienced when we embark on a new learning journey. That anxiety, which is interspersed with excitement, can make it challenging to feel comfortable in their role as an adult learner. Humanistic pedagogy principles allow the educational experience to be student centered and also focused on crafting that dignity and autonomy of the adult learner.

A similar concept, known as Compassionate Pedagogy, has been explored in a special issue of the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, and is defined as follows “*Compassionate pedagogy is about ensuring that our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues are based on kindness, and followed through by actions and practices that alleviate suffering and promote wellbeing. It is important because it allows students, teachers and all involved in universities to become a humanising voice which listens to and hears the realities of the marginalized and excluded* (Waddington, 2018, para 2).

Note that this definition of compassionate pedagogy includes a focus on humanism. When the adult learner is placed in a supportive and challenging educational environment, opportunities for student autonomy ensue. That autonomy allows students to be comfortable taking risks, develop a tolerance for ambiguity, and experience their humanness in a safe, professional, setting. This is parallel to what they will be asking their clients to do when they are functioning as a counselor.

While many of us were trained in traditional pedagogical approaches within the in person classroom, we have by choice or by necessity entered into online teaching and training. Online pedagogy is its own discipline with standards and best practices that are separate from traditional

land based instruction (Archambault, et al., 2022). Thus, the infusion of humanistic philosophy into online counselor education deserves careful consideration.

The Intersection of Humanistic Pedagogy and Online Counselor Education

Higher education pedagogy is often directed by accreditation requirements, assessment of signature assignments, and a focus on key performance indicators. In counselor education, faculty at times express frustration about this focus on outcomes over process (Purswell, et al., 2019). While we understand and support the need to identify and assess outcomes of our counselors in training, applying principles of humanistic learning theory can help address the frustration that faculty and students may feel when outcomes are based on numbers. Humanistic learning theory moves away from the acquisition of knowledge to focus more closely on the way in which the learning environment allows for the integration of skills and knowledge (Kunze, 2013).

Integration of skills and knowledge aligns with the standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) which specify that the “primary focus of counselor education programs is the training and preparation of professional counselors who are competent to practice (CACREP, 2024, glossary pg. 2)” and assessment of such is through “the measurement of an individual student’s level of attainment of knowledge, skills, and dispositions” (CACREP, 2024, glossary pg. 7) .

When looking at online counselor education through a humanistic lens, we find that the most effective online education for counselors is a humanistic framework (Sheperis, et al., 2020). A clear match exists between the open, safe, learner focused approach of humanistic pedagogy and the development of the skills to provide a parallel environment in a counseling setting.

Online Instructor as Humanist

As we all know in counselor education, the instructor sets the climate for the classroom experience. As true as it is in brick and mortar classrooms, the online classroom requires even more educator effort to make it truly humanistic. The way the instructor sets the stage is a primary element of how the class will run. A humanistic instructor is keyed into the emotional state of the class including being aware of strong feelings, negative or positive, and how the learning environment is being experienced by the students. The humanistic instructor takes on Roger’s position as a teacher- facilitator to share of themselves without imposing values, share as many learning resources as possible, and to remain flexible with goal setting throughout the course to adapt work to meeting the needed learning outcomes for the course (Bockmier-Sommers, et al., 2021)

Promoting Humanistic Classroom Practices

Researchers have found that what college students’ want in classrooms is to be recognized and appreciated as individuals; to bring real life experiences into the classroom; and to be treated with respect and trust (Latulippe, et al., 2022). These are all general humanistic principles. In addition to approaching the classroom from a general humanist perspective, the counselor educator engaging in humanistic pedagogy will also work to encourage students to develop their own specific learning outcomes and ways to meet them that align with broader course goals. The instructor can allow for greater creativity, self-expression, and increase autonomy of adult learning through humanistic classroom practices. By creating conditions to facilitate learning, including considering the whole person of the student, the humanistic instructor can allow unique identities, intersectionalities, and other aspects of individuality a place in the learning experience.

Overall, instructors can provide their students a full disclosure of what to expect from a humanistic-oriented learning environment. While informed consent is always necessary, a

humanistically oriented learning environment may cause learner anxiety due to unfamiliarity. The instructor can provide disclosure about how they view the student faculty relationship from a humanistic perspective; how assessment practices are shaped by humanistic pedagogy; and the role of self-disclosure in humanistic pedagogy. For grading, it is essential that humanistic instructors share that grades are not based on student self-disclosure, but that authenticity and self-awareness are important elements in the learning process.

Specific Class Activities to Bring Humanistic Pedagogy to Life

To benefit counselor educators teaching online who wish to infuse their work with humanistic pedagogy opportunities, we present a few selected activities to showcase humanistic opportunities within our discipline.

Increasing Presence

Open class 15 minutes early online. Invite students to come in and chat or share something with you and others about their week. Just as we would do in brick and mortar classroom, taking the time to create that safe space to be informal before class can help students feel more secure in their experiences.

Where's Waldo?

Start the class with a humanistic approach. Invite students to help you find and address any errors in your syllabus or online course. Most of us have PhDs in Counselor Education and Supervision, not in learning management systems. We make errors in our documents, due dates, have broken links, etc. Identify those as Waldo's from the cartoon puzzle and invite them to help you find them. Take away the fear that you are perfect or infallible and allow them to help. Include a picture of Waldo and even a Waldo puzzle in your email or announcement. Set the stage that you are human, approachable, compassionate, and collaborative before the class even starts.

Wellness Wheel

To demonstrate to students how the whole person is part of an education experience, it may be beneficial to use a wellness wheel activity to help students see various part of themselves. A wellness wheel traditionally helps students assess their spiritual, emotional, financial, environmental, social, intellectual, and physical well-being (Stubin, 2023). That assessment allows the student insight into what they need to learn well in your classroom.

Intention Setting and Going Forth

This is a simple way to infuse humanistic principles into your teaching. At the end of a lecture or a class, include a slide with these directions: *Intention Setting and Going Forth: Take a moment to write down something you'd like to do or learn more about going forth.* You can have students share with you what they wrote or they can keep it private. By taking the time to be intentional, the student can become accountable to their own needs for learning, which follows principles of humanistic pedagogy.

Conclusion

The integration of humanistic pedagogy in online counselor education provides a promising approach to creating an educational environment that is more humane, compassionate, and student-centered. This approach recognizes the dignity of the student as a whole person and seeks to develop their autonomy, openness, and genuineness. Overall, humanistic pedagogy parallels humanistic counseling to meet students at their point of need. By creating a safe, supportive, and challenging educational environment, opportunities for student autonomy ensue,

allowing students to be comfortable taking risks, develop a tolerance for ambiguity, and experience their humanness in a safe, professional setting.

Moreover, a humanistic approach to teaching can address the frustration that faculty and students may feel when outcomes are based solely on numbers. Humanistic pedagogy moves away from the acquisition of knowledge to focus more closely on the way in which the learning environment allows for the integration of skills and knowledge. This aligns with the standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), which specify that the primary focus of counselor education programs is the training and preparation of professional counselors who are competent to practice, and assessment of such is through the measurement of an individual student's level of attainment of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

By integrating specific class activities that showcase humanistic opportunities within the discipline humanistic pedagogy aims to increase presence, encourage students to bring real-life experiences into the online classroom, and promote the wellness of the whole person. Overall, the integration of humanistic pedagogy in online counselor education is a promising approach that can benefit both students and instructors alike.

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