Reflective Practice and Teaching Postgraduate Counselling Students

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Abstract

In the fields of counselling and psychology, reflective practice is a process where we critically analyse our actions with the aim of improving professional practice. Within a counsellor education setting, the current paper critically examines counselling skills lecturers' engagement in reflective practice during a course of study. Using a reflective practice approach, teaching modalities such as benavioural and humanistic person-centred approaches were taught to postgraduate students. This indicates that learning continues to evolve based on engagement. Reflectively, instructors engage in a reflective practice approach, provided the opportunity to be a spectator first before digging deep into feelings that may impact on professional practice as described by Imel (1992). Hence, these assumptions effectively impacted on counselling skills and teaching practice within the program.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Counselling Skills, Trainee Counsellors, Reflexivity

Introduction

This presentation explores the overarching reflective practice framework embedded in a counsellor education program. Thus, providing students the opportunity to develop and hone their counselling skills while drawing from specific counselling modalities. Theory is drawn from humanistic, psychodynamic, behavioural, systemic approaches and others.

Reflective practice is described as a process where one enters a deeply personal and contemplative space (Clutterbuck, 2001). According to Schon (1983) reflective practice entails thinking about our actions critically to help practitioners improve professional practice. Facets of reflective practice include framing & reframing. The emphasis is on moving towards a more inquiring, social and reflective approach to problems. Hence, reflective counselling practice within education settings may involve the implementation of appropriate reflective practice framework. I examine the role of the academic, the learner, relevant frameworks which encompass elements of reflective practice. I draw on Schon's (1983) concept of reflective holistic practice as. Schon theorised that reflection may occur informally as "reflection in action" and formally as "reflection on action". This suggests that as learning takes place so does reflective practice within training settings or other professional settings.

Significantly, student formation within the professional Counselling training program is drawn from approved training standards developed by accredited professional counselling peak bodies such as the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA). These organisations engage expert academics and practitioners to periodically review and refresh the training stands. These training standards are heavily relied upon by educators, practitioners, and employers as a benchmark for quality.

Knowledge within Reflective Practice

The reflective practitioner's knowledge within reflective practice includes scientific or research knowledge, representational knowledge and relational knowledge (Bager-Charlson, 2020). In addition, the use of reflective knowledge that is a conscious reflection may lead to action or change based on the counselling trainees' experiences. Hence, individualised and specific perspectives are considered. However, the concept of the reflective practitioner and its place in counsellor education settings remain highly debated.

Monaghan (2010) pointed out that students do not necessarily depend on the instructor within any learning environment. Rather self-formed learning, student participation in creation of new knowledge and group interest in common topics may shape learning (Monaghan, 2010). The notion of reflective practice emphasises the individual's professional experiences to improve practice (Schon, 1983). Schon argued that within a reflective practice framework, engagement in reflection-on –action and reflection-in action may take place. Reflection-on-action represents that which occurred in the past. In contrast, as the name states, reflection-in-action is based on present practice as it happens. As such, educators at various levels are encouraged to utilize reflective practice in their work. Using the above-mentioned model and drawing on Park's (2001) reflective knowledge framework, there are four types of knowledge evident within reflective practice. These include scientific knowledge based on empirical research; interpretive knowledge where the focus is on developing understanding of meanings, concepts or activities. Thus, bringing individual understanding, experiences, history and personality traits to consider events and concepts. According to Park (2001) relational knowledge represents human relation. This includes relating through expressions such as words, actions.

Finally reflective knowledge is described as deliberately reflecting to change specific activity. The outcome here is action which is described as a necessary aspect of reflective knowledge.

Research Questions

To explore further within the context of a postgraduate Counselling programs the following questions emerged:
1.   Is current reflective practice framework withing postgraduate education adequate for a training programs?
2.   Is it simply a case of applying theory to practice?

This emerging research on reflective practice within a postgraduate counselling course draws from the questions above. It is evident that skills development is essential in counsellor education settings discipline (Bager-Charleson, 2020). As such, postgraduate counselling programs emphasise reflective practice within curricular content. Thus, occurring where students are immersed in the practicum field work experience and related pre-requisite units. Significantly, from the educator-practitioner perspective I find that tracking learning achievements can empower the learner and help to achieve learning goals long term. Hence, working towards becoming a reflective practitioner enhances what one may bring to their current role, as well as the development of their future career plans (Schon, 1983).

I borrow from cognate disciplines including psychology and social work to address the research questions since reflective practice is also embedded in a range of discipline (Bager-Charleson, 2020).

Significance

This topic is significant as it adds to the body of knowledge on Counsellor education and curriculum development. Thus, good practice in counsellor education and training may further enhance students' concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation within the learning environment.

Methodology and Result

Using a mixed method approach, this research draws on available course data and existing literature on counsellor education and training to examine the role of reflective practice and its application within a postgraduate counsellor education program. A mixed methods study utilises a minimum of one qualitative and one quantitative method to collect and analyse data for a single study (Creswell, 1999). Thus, providing a review and analyses of the results. During the review process, the quality of studies is evaluated, and analysis of the study results is conducted based on their quality (Hart, 2018).

Reflective knowledge	Instructor reflection	Instructor perception
1. Scientific/ representational	Teaching & learning in helping professions; community of practice	
2. Representational/ interpretive	Understanding meaning	More interest in networking
3. Relational	Impact of environmental factors	Embed learning cluster
4. Reflective	Change current activities	Take action

Table 1: Using Reflective Knowledge within a Counsellor Training Program

Task	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	presentations
In class	Group development	Reflective Journaling	Reflective Journaling	selective	selective
Online task	Virtual cluster reflection	Group development	Group development	Virtual cluster reflection	Presentation
Online task	Social networking themes/online	Communities of learning	Social networking themes/online	Presentation	Virtual cluster reflection

Table 2: Embedding reflective practice within a counsellor training program

Discussion

Where the Instructor's Reflective Practice May Benefit Learning and Course Delivery

With ongoing changes in the learning environment, counselling course instructors may use reflective skills in their professional practice while also training learners to be reflective in their work within practicum, supervision, and the in-class learning environment.

Taylor (2006) lists the types of knowledge that enables one to be a reflective practitioner. These include *scientific knowledge*, *representational knowledge*, *relational knowledge*, and *reflection*. Using these various types of knowledge as framework suggest that the reflective practitioner employs specific knowledge groups within learning systems.

Hence, the instructor's thinking and practice may evolve to meet the needs of learners. The reflective practice framework encourages reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. This indicates that while immersed in teaching activities and after the teaching session, reflective practice occurs. Using representational knowledge in reflective practice indicates that a scientific approach is appropriate. This suggests that the trainer self- assessed the initial learning sessions with the group. As the semester progresses the need to improve professional practice may emerge. Understanding meaning in this context entails bringing in current knowledge and expertise in the field to support learning new concepts and skills. It also involves using interpretive knowledge to develop new meanings for the learner. Thus, focusing on introducing new themes and concepts to students, then working on case studies and supervision (where applicable) in small groups. This draws on the use of relational knowledge. Being able to relate to what students are experiencing within their environment suggests that the instructor brings some skills and relational knowledge into use as a teacher. Hence, within the discussed framework reflective knowledge is valuable. In this instance according to Park's reflective practice framework the instructor changes specific learning activities in the cohort's learning system. Thus, leading to action.

Table 1 provides an outline of steps taken within a reflective knowledge framework. Using a range of learning approaches, skills training and online activities occurred using critical reflection, feedback and journaling process. Over a period of one semester, core themes and concepts within each of the topic were introduced.

Table 2 shows lists where students used selected cases, critical reflection and video exercises. These exercises appeared to stimulate the interest of students while maintaining curriculum goals and outcomes. Working in dyads and triads also supported real life-like examples where each student checks in with the instructor and supervisor. Learning goals such as "becoming familiar with theories in counselling" and "developing presentation skills" were addressed based on set group and individual presentation forums over a period of one semester.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Overall reflective practice is ongoing, embedded in theory and collaborative. This opportunity to engage in reflective practice encourages the learner and the practitioner to explore their own history and culture. Thus, leading to self-awareness. Good practice is implemented within a counsellor education program by drawing upon the expertise of the academic team based on the teaching approach to counselling and building on selected modalities to support student learning. The overarching aim is to expose counselling students to an integrative approach to counselling. This provides opportunity to scaffold the learning. Also embedded within each unit is reflexivity and the opportunity to reflect-in- action and reflect-on-action.

Further research is needed to examine the academic validity of the quality of reflective activities and powerful assessment tools currently embedded within postgraduate Counselling courses.

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