

The use of a summary journal assignment to promote theory and practice integration in experientially based courses

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Abstract

The authors discuss the use of a summary journal, an assignment designed to facilitate the integration of theory and course experience in practice-based Counsellor Education courses. The reflections on the assignment are provided by the instructor and two students, from two different practice-based courses. The summary journal does appear to provide an opportunity for students to compare their own experiences with formal theory presented in class and in texts, although the quality of this integration varies. The provision of prior student summaries appears to be helpful to those students who are inexperienced in constructing theoretical meaning out of their own experiences. It is speculated that the evaluational nature of the summary section may inhibit critical responses to the test of theory through application, even though counter-examples, as well as examples of theory-in-action are explicitly invited.

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Introduction

This is a reflection piece, written with multiple perspectives on an assignment developed in experientially based Counsellor Education courses. The multiple perspectives are those of the instructor, and two counsellor education students, referred herein as Student One and Student Two. This layering of perspectives provides a number of reflective angles with which to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of this assignment developed to promote links between theory and student experience.

Counsellor educators have recognised the critical importance of the integration of theory and practice by students in experientially-based courses (Achenback, 2002; Coyne, et al., 1995; Grant, 2006; Hoffman, 2001). Achenback (2002) has noted the need for a “stronger linkage between course work, practicum training, and the supervisory experiences of Counsellor Education students.” Coyne (1995) has noted the importance of encouraging students to observe where theory does and does not fit their practical experience. In this way, “students develop their own conceptualizations derived not from known theory but responsive to their personal styles and the ecological contexts in which they are working (p. 205).”

Reflective journals have also been applied in experientially-based courses to promote the integration of experience, and at least preliminary examination of more general applications; however, reflective journals are challenging to evaluate (Connor-Greene, 2000). In addition, how does one encourage the weaving of conceptual material with reflection upon experience without overly proscribing the journal writing experience?

A more open expressive structure that encourages student-instructor dialogue has been effectively used to address defensiveness and resistance around multicultural issues (Mio & Barker-Hackert, 2003): Additionally, they have provided a safe environment to consider concerns relating to ethnic heritage (Kerl, 2002; Kirk, 1989). Garmon (1998) and Cook (2000) have used a dialogically based approach to challenge student thinking around multicultural issues.

Conner-Greene (2000) has applied a more structured approach to journal assignments to promote the application of psychological concepts introduced in the course material. These assignments allowed for student-instructor dialogue, yet they were focused on the specific task of applying psychological frameworks to characters in literature or in the media.

Recognising the need to provide multiple opportunities to link theory and practice raises a number of pedagogical questions. These include asking how we provide opportunities for integration, as well as how we find evidence that integration has occurred. Good use has been made of field notes, case studies augmented by conceptually based writing assignments, and conceptual discussions following extended role play experiences (Achenback, 2002; Coyne, 1995; Grant, 2006; McGoldrick, Giordomo, & Pearce, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2003).

A two-part assignment was developed in an effort to provide two different kinds of experience. The first part offered the opportunity for unmediated reflection. The second part encouraged an intentional process of integrating experiential and theoretical issues.

Methodology

The multiple reflections by students in this article were solicited by the Instructor, once each of the student's courses were completed. Student One and Student Two have worked with the summary journal in a cross-cultural counselling course and in a practice-based introductory course to group counselling. A journal example is also used from an additional student, Student Three, who participated in the group counselling course. Student Three kindly gave us permission to quote from his journal, providing an additional illustrative example, but he was not involved in writing the article.

Journal and course structure

Course Structure

The summary journal was assigned in two courses, Cross Cultural Counselling and Group Counselling. Both courses include a substantial experiential component. The Cross Cultural Counselling course includes a "cultural immersion" component in which students are expected to participate actively, for six consecutive weeks, in a cultural context different from their own. The range of participation included being a participant in religious services, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and assisting in

an after-school setting in a community centre. Students were asked to keep a journal recording of each experience in a different cultural context. The classroom experience of twenty-eight students included lectures on cross-cultural counselling and small group work focusing on case studies and students' immersion experiences. Students were encouraged to participate in both the large class, lecture formats, and small group format. Student One was enrolled in the Cross Cultural Counselling Course. She was not randomly chosen to participate in this study. She was an active participant in classroom discussions, and she actively engaged in dialogue through the journal, as well. Coming from a minority culture, she used her minority experience to question and engage with the course material.

The Group Counselling course, made up of twelve students, also had a lecture component and a group experience component. Lectures focused on counselling groups and group leadership development. The other component of the class was structured as a group "lab," in which students participated as group members of a psychoeducational group. The psychoeducational group focused on their adjustment and development as graduate students. A group disclosure was used for the "lab" section, describing the goals and expectations of the group and its leader. Students were encouraged to participate actively as group members, as well as to reflect on the evolving group process, as future group leaders. They were asked to keep a journal on the group experience, also commenting on the lecture section if they wished. Student Two also actively participated in a back and forth dialogue through the journal, although she was frequently less active in classroom discussions. The courses ran concurrently, and they are both required courses for a Masters in Counsellor Education.

Journal Structure

As described above, the summary journal is a two-part assignment. One part, which may be described as more dialogical, consists of personal reflections, questions, and assertions relating to experiences in the field or in the classroom. These entries may be highly personal reflections, simple observations, or opportunities to wrestle with theoretical questions based on observations and experiences. The entries are shared intermittently with the instructor and they are commented upon, but not evaluated.

In addition, midterm and final integrative summaries are assigned, for which students are required to combine conceptual material from the course with observations and experiences. Experiences may be illustrative of conceptual material or they may provide contradictory or exceptional evidence to theoretical generalisations.

In the summary journal's initial conception and assignment, students were given considerable autonomy in deciding which conceptual issues to highlight and discuss, as well as how many concepts to consider. Students were encouraged to interweave supporting or contradictory examples from their experience in their theoretical discussions. They were advised that the more thoroughly conceptual issues were discussed, the more favourably the summaries will be evaluated.

Before discussing some of the strengths and weaknesses of this original model, from the instructor's and students' point of view, the authors offer some examples of entries from the dialogical sections and entries from the summary sections.

Journal examples

The following two entries are from the dialogical section of student journals. The first example arose out of a field experience in Cross Cultural Counselling, observing the Student Buddhist Association.

I attended the organization again and I found myself wondering how I would counsel European Americans based on my experience with oppression. When I see white students bowing and practicing (sic) a tradition that is so embedded in Asian culture I wonder how genuine they are in trying to understand this culture. I find that many white students who think certain aspects of the Asian culture are trendy, use and exploit these traditions until they find something more meaningful to them. This frustrates me because as an Asian American I have found it painful and difficult to be recognized as an equal American citizen in this country because of my physical experience
(Student One)

The second example reflects experience in the Group Counselling class.

I am also pleased at how _____ has incorporated herself into the group. Most of us knew each other prior to the group, but she didn't know most of us. Since the beginning she has participated and self disclosed, making herself a vital member. She said tonight that she couldn't believe our time as a group is almost up and she wants everyone's email address because she really feels a connection to us.
(Student Two)

Below are some examples of discussions from the summarising section of the journal. Concrete experiential examples from the group process were interwoven in the discussion, but those sections have not been included in order to protect the confidentiality of particular group members.

However, at this point in the semester, resistance was a key theme. The group did attempt to move away from discomfort and conflict in a vain attempt to move beyond the conflict. That obviously was not going to work, but was an important and influential factor in our storming period. It really wasn't until we allowed ourselves to speak up, be loud and vocal about our wants that allowed us to face this conflict and move on. Again, this had to do with control. (Student Three)

As I write this reflection essay, we are in the midst of the working stage. During this stage, we have met our group goals to develop a genuine concern for our fellow members as well as to be able to provide and accept constructive feedback. In my opinion, these goals were ones that I most wished to achieve. I am so pleased to be able to report that we were successful in doing so!

It seems that our level of trust with one another has continued to increase, which is evident in the increased level of self-disclosure and risk-taking by members within the group. (Student Two)

In her summarising section, Student One spoke of the challenges as an Asian American participating in a setting in which members, who were European Americans, engaged in non-Western traditions and rituals. She wrestled with

questions regarding understanding, involvement, and exploitation. She also discussed implications for minority counsellors working with non-minority clients:

As a bicultural student I have witnessed how society has contributed to the systemic and institutional oppression our young students of color face on a daily basis, but through this class I have learned that as a counsellor I will face situations where I will need to [counsel] people from the dominant society. I find it is crucial for cross-cultural counsellors to understand how students of color wrestle with their bicultural identity but at the same time understanding how to provide appropriate therapy for students who may also be struggling with their white identity as well. (Student One)

Risks and opportunities with the integrative journal as a pedagogical tool

We would like to point out both the risks and opportunities of sharing personal feelings with the instructor in written form. While there is opportunity to articulate and vent feelings, as well as to bring these feelings into conversation with the instructor, there is also the risk that these conversations may diminish a student's need to bring these issues to the larger class group. The journal may be useful when there is a genuine unreadiness to share particular issues with a class. However, for those issues best discussed in the context of the larger group, it takes the right mix of instructor encouragement and student initiative to bring the written issues to class conversations.

One may ask if the depth and veracity of feeling shared within journal summaries is muted because this section is evaluated as a course assignment. We would speculate that a degree of veracity and perhaps some depth is sacrificed in the process of shaping this section into a piece to be turned in as an evaluated assignment. However, it provides concrete experience of the process of integration, providing opportunities to validate or invalidate conceptual theory.

One initial problem with the assignment appeared related to the structure and description of the integrative summary section. When the summary journal was first introduced, students were simply instructed to combine and integrate the experiences recorded in their weekly journals with the theories and concepts presented in the course. The extent to which students engaged conceptual material varied widely at that point. It was soon learned that a more specific description, with examples of this summarising section, was necessary.

Before describing some of the changes made in the assignment, perspectives on the experience of writing an integrative journal are given below.

Student perspectives on the summary journal

Outlet for thoughts, feelings, and frustrations

According to Student Two, one benefit that the journal provided was a much needed outlet to express thoughts, feelings, and frustrations. She reported that writing in the journal helped her to sort out thoughts and feelings. It proved to be a therapeutic and cathartic activity. If she had been quite upset or frustrated after a class, she found that she felt better after writing it down. The course in group work

was not a typical course that included a lecture-style format. There was active participation by all students, which often resulted in the discussion of personal topics and in the expression of differences of opinions. The journal provided an instant and convenient way to record and sometimes vent current thoughts.

Mio and Hackett (2003) point out that journal opportunities provide an outlet for emotional reactions to the course materials as well as a way to process cognitively those reactions.

Dealing with emotional reactions to course material may particularly be an issue for ethnic minority students ... journal outlet for expression and processing of these emotions. (p. 16)

Student One found that the journal gave her the opportunity to casually jot down notes and any emotions that she was feeling through each of the Student Buddhist Association meetings that she attended. She used the journal to reflect on her semester-long participation in a cultural experience. The cultural experience was a project in which students engaged in a community that is foreign to them in order to understand a different worldview. Student One found the journal to be a creative medium for her to express her own view on the goals of the course. She noted that the journal showed her how to connect cross-cultural counseling theories such as the WRAT (White Racial Identity Model, Helms, 1995) to the cultural experience, in order to be a more effective multicultural counsellor. According to Student Two, the journal was a tool that allowed her to brainstorm what she was learning in the course and relate it to a real world experience on paper.

Student Two reported that it allowed her to make connections between what she was experiencing within her class and concepts, ideas, and theories in her texts. For example, while a student in Introduction to Group Work, she read a great deal about the stages through which groups go during their development, and she was readily able to identify that her own group was indeed passing through these stages by relating her personal experiences to those in the texts. The journal provided a format for her to make these connections.

Communication with the Instructor

Student Two noted that the reflective journal also provided a way for her to communicate with her professor throughout the semester, affirming Mio and Hackett's (2003) assertion that journal writing creates the opportunity for "dialogue with students about the issues ..." (p. 14). Student One noted that the professor was able to view what she had been thinking and feeling, when she was not ready or willing to disclose to the class as a whole. She was also given feedback and, during those times, she felt as though her thoughts were recognised and validated.

Tracking growth and development

Finally, Student Two reported that the reflective journal allowed her to view, in a concrete way, the progress and/or changes she made during the semester. In this way, the professor was able to observe personal growth and development. Student Two also noted that she and her peers did not share their journals with one another. In this way, although the journal may be quite individually rewarding, it may have limited value in promoting classroom interaction.

One problem Student One noted involved variation in the effective integration of the cultural experience. There was no formal structure to the journal writing, and Student One found that many students in the classroom did not understand how to relate the reading material to the cultural experience. During class presentations,

she found it disappointing that many of the students were unable to articulate and educate the rest of the class on how accurate or inaccurate the reading material was in portraying multicultural clients. As a prospective counsellor, she had been eager to learn how her peers (mostly from European American descent) found the theories in the book useful in understanding minority groups. Student One suggested a classroom dialogue on their journals during midterm, to provide students with feedback from their peers to see if they are on track or not.

The limitations of time and classroom size

Student One recognised that this level of sharing and reflection among peers would only be possible if the classroom was intimate in size. She speculated that the journal may be most useful in particular courses, ones that demand students' active participation in various activities. Both students speculated that the journal may be most useful in classes with a limited number of students in order to achieve the highest benefit.

Student Two noted that, if taken seriously by students, journal writing can be quite time consuming. Finally, Student One pointed out that utilising summary journals in a cross-cultural classroom can be quite useful, but more research should be reviewed in order to learn how these journals can be used to their fullest potential.

Assignment goals and outcomes from an Instructor's perspective

The provision of examples

As described above, both the dialogical and summary sections appeared to have potential as pedagogical tools, but the actual assignment description needed greater specificity and refinement. At the most basic level, the instructor found it necessary to be more specific about an integrative discussion, that is, the discussion of one or two concepts out of the textual and classroom material did not involve enough conceptual depth, while the discussion of four to six concepts as they relate to recorded feelings and experiences appeared to provide the possibility of a conceptual rich and thoughtful discussion. The provision of examples of good integrative discussions proved invaluable in providing an orientation to this assignment. Examples appeared to provide direction for students who were inexperienced in comparing their reflections with formal theory. She found that the summary sections improved with the refinement of the assignment. The quality of the synthesis of experience and theory continued to vary, although less widely. This affirms Garmon's (1998) observations that "students differ in their ability and willingness to write reflectively and to engage in written dialogue" (p. 43). For instance, by providing examples from the journal of Student Three, in subsequent classes, some students appeared less mystified by the process of integrating theory with reflective journal work.

Critical inquiry

Even with examples of thoughtful summaries, students appeared reluctant to provide contrary examples to textual classroom material. Although they were encouraged to do so, students appeared reluctant to discuss evidence that differs from "expert" assertions, especially in an evaluated assignment. For future application, it is hoped that successful examples, once they are acquired, will provide encouragement and incentive for this level of critical inquiry.

The process of dialogue and reflection allowed non-minority students to process and integrate feelings related to privilege, as well as minority students to integrate

feelings associated with minority status. Student One's journal entries discuss her experiences as an Asian American observing a Buddhist group composed entirely of Caucasian students. She reflected upon the ways that Buddhism may be translated through the monocultural lens of the dominant culture rather than an exploration of Buddhist traditions gained through experiential knowledge of Asian traditions (Sue, 2001). Here the journal may offer an opportunity to explore the ramifications of monoculturalism, as well as her own path to the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary for multidimensional cultural competence as a counsellor (Sue, 2001). The development of awareness entails claiming a voice in the acquisition of competencies, and, as Cook (1991) described, journaling may be used as a pathway to the development of that voice.

It did seem to provide a powerful means for more marginalised students to claim a voice in their education, and for less marginalised students to unlearn their privileges. (p. 20)

Journal entries and classroom discussion

As briefly discussed earlier, there are strengths and risks to the relative safety of the non-evaluated dialogical sections. Some students used the student-instructor dialogue as an opportunity to articulate and sort out issues, which were later brought to class discussions in a thoughtful manner. However, some students left their thoughts and feelings to the relative safety of exchanged notes without venturing into the riskier territory of class discussion. At times this was appropriate, because of the personal matter being discussed, or because of the level of functioning of the individual within the group: At other times it was the easier way out, and it is the responsibility of the instructor to distinguish between these two uses.

As Student Two noted, this is a time consuming assignment. Needless to say, the assignments are also time-consuming to evaluate, as Garmon (1998) points out. Student One observed benefit to the time spent in the reflection of practice experiences was that class participation yielded less immediate impressions and more thoughtful interaction around questions and ideas that may have already been through initial stages of articulation. This enabled more dialogue around ideas rather than the expression of immediate reaction. As Student One points out, more research would further refine both the dialogical and summarising aspects of the journal process.

Conclusion

Both students and the instructor point to the potential value of the summary journal for the purposes of productive dialogue on experience and for the linking of experience to theory. Some of the limitations of this journal are that it requires a careful combination of structure and freedom in its assignment. Most importantly, it requires discussion and examples around conceptual integration. The journal may provide an outlet that, if not loosely monitored, may substitute for class participation.

Areas that appear to be both strengths and limitations, depending on the particular student, class, and instructor, are that the assignment requires a good deal of time and attention across the semester and it offers an opportunity for critical reflection on theory, soliciting contradictory and supporting examples from experience, or as Connor-Greene (2000) describes dialogue journal use, it is an opportunity to balance course content with application. However, the evaluational nature of the

summary section may inhibit critical responses to the test of theory through application.

Some of the strengths observed are that it appears to bring greater reflectivity to classroom participation and it allows for dialogue on issues that may never be brought to classroom discussion. As Garmon (1998) points out, it “can help instructors to get and know their students better, thus enabling them to adapt their instruction as necessary to better meet the students’ needs” (p. 42). Perhaps most importantly, it offers the opportunity to formally practice the synthesis of theory and experience. As Mio and Hackett (2003) describe it, the process of journal writing and reflection encourages students to construct their own meanings out of ideas presented in class as they connect to personal experience. The summary journal formalises the process of interweaving conceptual learning and application.

It is hoped that this article may initiate a dialogue on pedagogical tools that intentionally link experiential and didactic learning. This dialogue may lead to the refinement of both the structure and application of this assignment as well as the evolution of other integrative learning tools.

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