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Integration of Learning in Counselor Education

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Abstract

Integration of learning (IOL) has been defined as an essential learning outcome in higher education. The IOL model describes the process of learning through three types of integration: connection, application, and synthesis. This manuscript applies the IOL model to counselor education in order to examine how counselor education programs implement the model. Andragogic approaches in counselor education programs are highlighted utilizing the three types of integration, illustrating how these programs exemplify integration. Implications for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: integration of learning, counselor education, synthesis, andragogy

Integration of learning (IOL) has been defined by Barber (2012) as "the demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesize information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts" (p. 593). IOL has been identified as an essential learning outcome by leading higher education associations in the United States and as a necessary skill for success in the twenty-first century to meet the increased demand for college graduates to make connections among life experiences, academic studies, and their accumulated knowledge (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007; Keeling, 2004). Barber (2012) identified three main categories of integration, including (a) establishing a connection between skills or ideas that are distinctive; (b) application across contexts, or the use of knowledge from one context to another; and (c) synthesis of a new whole, or creating new knowledge from the combination of two insights. Barber also indicated that the IOL model describes the process of learning, rather than the outcome or the practice of learning. Thus, IOL can be facilitated by educators and instructors through intentional educational interventions.

Four recommendations for encouraging IOL inside and outside of the classroom include (a) inviting conversations, (b) actively bridging contexts, (c) promoting perspective taking, and (d) encouraging reflection (Barber, 2012). Barber also emphasized that learning is intercontextual; that is, learning occurs across many contexts, not just academic or career-related experiences. Many of the tenets of the IOL model seem to fit well with the andragogic and developmental foundations of counselor education, including heightening of self-awareness (Sue et al., 1998), multicultural competence (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014), experiential learning (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009; Swank, 2012), and application of knowledge to clinical situations (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs [CACREP], 2016). Based on the overlap between IOL and counselor education, I will explore the application of the IOL model to CACREP accredited counselor education programs to support the notion that these programs provide a unique model for promoting IOL. As ideal models for IOL, I will also support the notion that counselor education programs can provide a framework for other programs in higher education who wish to facilitate IOL.

Counselor Education

CACREP (2016) has created standards for counselor education programs to promote a unified profession and ensure that students graduate with a strong professional counselor identity. CACREP's (2016) standards stipulate that accredited counselor education programs prepare graduates as "counseling practitioners…for careers in mental health, human services, education, private practice, government, military, business, and industry" (p. 4). Despite eight core curricular requirements, CACREP (2016) does not specify how areas of knowledge and skills are taught, assessed, or developed in accredited programs (Swank, 2012). Counselor educators are thus given flexibility in their teaching methods, leading to a diversity of andragogic approaches in counselor education programs.

Counselor educators utilize a range of teaching methods to meet the needs of counseling students. A phenomenological study of counselor educators' strategies for success identified four themes that educators attributed to their success, including using multiple teaching strategies, taking a student-centered approach, keeping knowledge current, and developing positive attitudes toward

teaching and learning (Niles, Akos, & Cutler, 2001). Of these themes, counselor educators identified the multiple teaching strategies most frequently used, for example, "I integrate minilectures with videos, role plays, and games" (p. 281). These findings supported the notion that counselor training traditionally balanced didactic teaching with experiential learning related to counselor skills (Rabinowitz, 1997).

Experiential learning theory (ELT; Kolb, 1984) emphasizes a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation for promoting deep learning. Kolb's concepts of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation explicated that learners create guidelines for actions across situations, and subsequently test their ideas through action. Thus, ELT and IOL concepts seem to overlap, such that learners construct knowledge across contexts from a cycle of experience, reflection, and action. ELT is utilized across counselor education courses, including multicultural counseling (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Kim & Lyons, 2003), group counseling (Ieva et al., 2009), and couples and family counseling (Shurts et al., 2006), and can facilitate IOL through processes of active and reflective learning.

Counselor educators facilitate experiential learning through a range of interventions such as gameplay, role-play, and flipped classrooms. Gameplay has been applied to counselor education to facilitate creativity, assist students in comprehending information, encourage participation, and foster counseling competency (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Swank, 2012). Role-play in counseling-related situations has also been accepted as a standard component of counselor education programs (Baker, Daniels, & Greeley, 1990). Other counselor educators have suggested using flipped classrooms to encourage experiential learning, higher order thinking, and problem-solving (Moran & Milsom, 2015). Thus, a range of teaching methods are used to facilitate experiential learning in counselor education, which may contribute to IOL.

Integration of Learning in Counselor Education

Applying the IOL model to specific contexts of counselor education may further enhance understanding of how IOL is manifested in teaching methods and program requirements. The IOL model utilizes transfer of learning (Perkins & Salomon, 1988) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) as conceptual bases. While an in-depth exploration of these theories is outside the scope of this manuscript, several assertions of the theories can be identified through

the IOL model. To highlight the similarities across IOL and counselor education programs, each category of integration will be explored through specific contexts in CACREP accredited counselor education programs.

Connection

Connection is a relationship between two things, which often occurs at a point in time in a single context (Barber, 2012). Counselor education encourages students to reflect and make connections between their learning, personal life experience, and counseling practice. Reflective practice is employed in several courses (i.e., group counseling, practicum) through the use of journaling (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). The intent of journals is for students to create a space in which they can intentionally reflect on their experience, thus making connections between their learning process and their personal worldview. Counselor educators also provide feedback to journal responses (i.e., guided reflection) in order to facilitate further connection between students' ideas and experiences that happen in and outside of the classroom (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1981).

Connection is also facilitated through the required experiential group. CACREP (2016) requires "direct experiences in which students participate as group members in a small group activity… for a minimum of 10 clock hours over the course of one academic term" (p. 13). Although there is no consensus on the most appropriate method for providing the group experience (Fall & Levitov, 2002), many programs employ a model in which students participate in an experiential group among their peers. Ieva et al. (2009) identified themes that emerged during the group process, including personal self-awareness and development. Increased self-awareness and reflective capacity encourage the ability to connect knowledge across contexts through forming abstract concepts, which students can then generalize from situation to situation (Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984).

Self-awareness is related to the development of multicultural counseling skills, and experiential activities have been recognized as excellent options for facilitating self-awareness (Westwood, 1994). Awareness of assumptions, values, and biases helps counseling students work more effectively with clients that are different from themselves. This awareness allows counseling students to develop the capacity for connecting ways their worldview may impact work with clients (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Furthermore, developing abstract conceptu-

alizations of clients creates a dynamic model for counseling students to connect their work across different contexts (e.g., workplace, treatment modality) and idiosyncratic clients (Kolb, 1984). Although connection may sometimes be difficult to isolate from the other areas of integration (i.e., application, synthesis), several contexts of counselor education promote connection, including reflective journals, experiential groups, and multicultural training.

Application

Application is an action that makes use of knowledge in a new context and requires more complexity than recognizing a connection (Barber, 2012). Application is utilized across several contexts of counselor education, primarily role-play, the group counseling course, and required clinical experiences (i.e., practicum and internship). Role-play is often utilized in counselor education to simulate in-vivo therapeutic experiences (Rabinowitz, 1997), and has been supported in effectively increasing trainees' counseling self-efficacy (Munson, Stadulis, & Munson, 1986). Counselor education may also use simulation exercises that use a combination of scripted role plays and scenarios that occur in a counseling setting (Schwitzer, Gonzalez, & Curl, 2001). Simulat-

ed exercises encourage students to apply their knowledge learned in didactic instruction to working with peer or simulated clients. While the context of learning may be similar in role-play or simulation, the ability to utilize knowledge in an applied context (i.e., active experimentation) would seem to facilitate application of knowledge to other contexts.

As previously described, counseling students also apply knowledge in the experiential component of their group course. Counselor educators agree that students need to participate in an interactive group experience to develop the necessary skills to be a group leader (Fall & Levitov, 2002). In the experiential group, students apply knowledge gained from their group counseling and techniques courses to facilitate group processes, provide support for other group members, and take on responsibilities of group leadership. While models differ for meeting the group requirement, experiential groups may facilitate skill development, empathy, confrontation, feedback, and self-growth through group interaction (Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, & Hundley, 1997), encouraging students to directly apply counseling-related skills to a group context.

CACREP's (2016) standards also require two primary clinical

experiences in counselor education: a 100-hour practicum, and a 600-hour internship. Students are required to work with clients in settings relevant to their specialty area of counseling, and often work in settings around the community that are not associated with the counselor education program (e.g., mental health agencies, public schools, hospitals). The clinical sequence of counselor education programs seems to be the purest form of application, as students take the knowledge gained from their coursework and apply it to working with actual clients. Furthermore, students engaged in the clinical course sequence receive clinical supervision, which may assist them in being supported, challenged, and encouraged to reflect in a way that encourages further IOL (CACREP, 2016; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010).

Synthesis

Synthesis is when a new insight is created, or construction of a novel concept that indicates deeper involvement with information, experiences, or skills (Barber, 2012). Synthesis may also be occurring in the same context as application or connection, as it seems that these processes can occur cohesively (Barber, 2014). IOL's description of synthesis seems to reflect Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, specifically the

assertion that abstract conceptualizations are informed through inductive (i.e., following concrete experiences) and deductive (i.e., generalizing specific learning experiences) processes. Synthesis is also represented through the bidirectional relationship between the four conditions of learning (Kolb, 1984). For example, having a concrete experience provides learners with data to form conceptualizations of phenomena, just as testing a theory can provide us with feedback to alter our conceptualizations. Thus, synthesis occurs in counselor education when students alter prior conceptualizations of learning when experiencing new contexts. Synthesis occurs most often through the contexts of counselor education that promote self-awareness and insight, such as the experiential group (Ieva et al., 2009), multicultural counseling training (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Kim & Lyons, 2003), or the clinical course sequence.

Of experiences in counselor education that promote IOL, the clinical course sequences seem to offer the most opportunities for synthesis. For example, a counselor may be seeing a client who is experiencing depression, a problem that they have worked on with previous clients. The counselor would then apply their previous knowledge of working with a client who experienced depression.

However, the constructed experience of the current client will influence the context of depression. To successfully treat the client, the counselor would need to synthesize old information with new information to create a new conceptualization of how to approach their current client.

This synthesis of information reflects the bidirectional influence of active experimentation and abstract conceptualization, as new practical information changes the counseling student's conceptualization of how to approach working with the client (Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, working with new clients represents a new context, thus fitting IOL's description of synthesis. The value that the counseling field has placed on social constructionism (Rudes & Guterman, 2007), as well as ethical standards in counseling (ACA, 2014), imply that practicing counselors must synthesize information to be able to work with an array of clients across multiple cultural backgrounds, modalities, and contexts. Thus, counselor education programs intentionally utilize reflective experiences (Hubbs & Brand, 2005) and experiential learning processes (Kolb, 1984) to facilitate synthesis.

Implications and Conclusion

Although addressed briefly, literature and CACREP (2016) requirements support the notion that IOL occurs in counselor education programs. Research applying the IOL model to counselor education may further support this idea. Furthermore, counselor education programs may increase IOL through providing opportunities for students to connect knowledge across courses and experiences, especially their clinical sequence. Counselor education may also be an area of education that is particularly well suited to the IOL model, and thus may serve as a framework for other programs that wish to facilitate IOL. Limitations to consider are that other areas of education may have difficulty applying the IOL due to programmatic requirements or beliefs about the nature of learning. However, the essential nature of IOL in the twenty-first Century (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007; Keeling, 2004) seems to indicate a need for programs to move past tradition to facilitate IOL among adult learners.

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