

Promoting Authentic Learning by Engaging in “Real-World” Research

Ellen K. Carruth, PhD, LMHC

Laura Schmuldt, PhD, NCC

Division of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

In this chapter, the authors describe the benefits of engaging in action research in a counselor education program. Action research is defined, and the concepts are illustrated with examples from one such project (i.e., “Finding Their Voice”). Additionally, the process of “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1897) is illustrated throughout the chapter with examples from the current project. The authors advocate for implementing action research in education as a means of increasing authenticity in learning. The authors discuss the benefits of action research in counselor education, and the authors describe ways in which members of other academic disciplines might infuse this collection of activities into their own curriculum.

Introduction

In the field of mental health counseling, some researchers have highlighted a lack of congruence between research and practice (e.g., Guiffrida, Douthit, Lynch, & Mackie, 2011). For many practitioners, research is not a primary professional responsibility, and as a result, counselors may not have had opportunities to engage in research investigations that could be potentially beneficial to their client populations. Interestingly, the current standards proposed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) stipulate that counselors be made aware of “the importance of research in advancing the counseling profession” (CACREP, 2009, Standard G.8.a). Aside from counselor education programs, scholars have discussed the culture of research across institutions of higher education and have described a similar disconnect between research and practice. Schön (1995) described this as a quandary of “rigor and relevance,” and called upon scholars to pay attention to the problems of the “swampy lowlands,” which are “of greatest human concern” (p. 28). Traditional research methods may not be amenable to the inherently complex and “messy” problems often faced by mental health clinicians. Guiffrida and colleagues (2011) highlighted this important work and made the case for counselors and counselor educators to delve into the complexities of real-world problems through action-research. Given these disparate views regarding the importance of research as a professional behavior and the reported lack of relevant research in the counseling field, the current discussion will offer one possible solution for educators in counselor education programs. The following discussion is twofold: first, the authors describe a real-world action-research project designed to explore the perceived impact of budget cuts in community mental health; and second, the authors outline student/faculty learning experiences that occurred alongside the research.

Finding Their Voice

This chapter will include information regarding the process of promoting authentic learning by engaging in “real-world” research by describing an action-research project, entitled “Finding Their Voice.” This project will be described next, in an effort to provide contextual relevance for the reader.

Project Description

This particular project (“Finding Their Voice”) was developed by one author (Ellen) after her experience working as a case manager in the mental health system. Ellen was working with approximately 110 clients, all of whom were chronically mentally ill, and were recipients of state assistance, usually in the form of Medicaid vouchers. During this time, the state of Washington experienced significant funding cuts that targeted many of the programs that provide services to individuals with disabilities (Gregoire, 2010). These clients experienced severe hardships on a daily basis: many were homeless, many had multiple disabilities that affected their ability to live successfully in their community, and many had severely limited incomes that prohibited participation in growth-fostering activities. Ellen witnessed clients losing their housing, losing their cash assistance, losing their food assistance, and losing prescription and medical benefits. Given her place in the lives of these clients (i.e., as a case manager), Ellen was aware of the impacts of these cuts from a unique perspective.

Because of this firsthand knowledge, Ellen decided to develop an exploratory investigation in which other clinicians could discuss their own perceptions of the ways in which budget cuts have affected their clients. To accomplish this objective, Ellen designed a research proposal in which focus group interviews (Morgan, 1988) would be the primary method of data collection. Focus groups as qualitative research combine elements of individual interviews and participant observation. The main benefit of the focus group is the “opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time” (Morgan, 1988, p. 15). Additionally, focus groups are especially suited for research questions that are exploratory in nature (Morgan, 1988).

Getting Started

As the project began to take shape, Ellen decided that the topic would be quite relevant for students in the master’s program in counseling. Ellen was aware that some were interested in conducting research; in fact, some were interested in conducting research specific to community mental health issues. Ellen decided to invite these students to participate in the project, based on their expressed interests.

Ellen submitted the original Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal in June, and scheduled the first team meeting in July, shortly thereafter. At this meeting, Ellen introduced the team members to the project, discussed the qualitative research paradigm, and discussed the initial steps of the project (i.e., IRB approval, recruiting strategies, and informed consent). During this meeting, Ellen encouraged team members to start thinking about keeping a reflective journal of their experiences through the process. Reflective journaling is a process through which individuals have the opportunity to practice self-awareness, and the activity might serve as a lens through which individuals may view their experiences, either in retrospect or in vivo (Raelin, 2000).

After the protocol was initially approved, Ellen became aware of an unexpected requirement for recruiting participants: the IRB had an existing policy, stating that “organizational consent” should be obtained from any agencies that agreed to participate in the study. Accordingly, after receiving the initial approval, Ellen began to prepare information packets that could then be submitted to potential agency directors in order to obtain their consent before recruiting individual participants. Unbeknownst to Ellen and to the team, this particular issue (i.e., organizational consent) was to become a significant challenge in the forward momentum of the project.

Bracketing

As the team waited to hear back from agencies, a bracketing interview was scheduled. Bracketing, in qualitative research, is one way to mitigate potential negative effects of personal preconceptions regarding the research question (Tufford & Newman, 2012). This particular strategy is often seen in phenomenological investigations, which is one method of qualitative inquiry. Creswell (2013) asserted that “phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” (p. 82). In phenomenological research, researchers are called on to identify their own personal assumptions about the phenomenon in question through bracketing. In this particular case, Ellen had firsthand experience with this phenomenon (as a case manager). In order to strengthen the “rigor” of this particular investigation, the bracketing interview was to be the time for team members to express our own assumptions about the research questions so that

these assumptions could be “suspended” during data collection and analysis. Additionally, the bracketing process was an opportunity to “experience” one aspect of the process of qualitative inquiry in a personally meaningful way.

Certain members of the research team were unable to attend the scheduled bracketing interview. Consequently, the team was faced with a challenge: How can we move forward given that not all members of the team had an opportunity to participate in bracketing? For Ellen, this was beyond her current knowledge and understanding of the concept of bracketing. She decided that it would be necessary to reach out to the professional community and seek guidance. Ellen accomplished this by posing a question to a well-known electronic mailing list that many counselor educators used as a discussion forum. The question was presented as follows (Carruth, 2012):

Hello, esteemed colleagues,

I am a new faculty member, and have recently received IRB approval to begin my first post-dissertation research study. I've designed the study, recruited students for membership on the research team, briefed the students about the process, etc.

I have stumbled into an unexpected event, however. I have a group of four students, and we are beginning an exploration of the perceived impacts of budget cuts on consumers of community mental health in Washington State, from the perspective of service providers.

I established a time (the team agreed) for our “bracketing” interview. I arranged for a colleague to facilitate the interview, and then two of the four students on my team didn't show up. Because I had made arrangements with my colleague, we went ahead and “bracketed” the rest of us. I am a bit lost as to what I should do next, though.

I don't know if I should:

- a) bracket the other members separately,*
- b) scrap that interview and reschedule for the whole team,*
- c) prohibit those team members from the data collection,*
- d) “drop” those members from the team, or*
- e) ????*

I am keenly aware of the perceptions of the team members that were present and how this turn of events may impact group cohesion. I'm at a loss here, and would sincerely appreciate input/suggestions/insights based on your experiences.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Ellen K. Carruth, PhD, LMHC

From this query, Ellen received a number of responses. One, in particular, was extraordinarily helpful in reminding her that bracketing, from a phenomenological perspective, is a process, not a discrete event. In fact, bracketing is amorphous, by its very nature (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The team discussed the issue and made a plan for continuing the process of bracketing. This particular activity was a unique opportunity for Ellen to teach the members of the team about a specific strategy used in qualitative research to ensure the trustworthiness of data that are collected throughout the project (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, it was an opportunity for Ellen to model her own process of learning.

Making Contacts

As the team waited to hear back from individual agencies that had been solicited, one serendipitous event took place. A fellow faculty member at the university was a member of a local council that advocated for agencies that serve people of color in the local community. This colleague was gracious enough to inform the executive director (ED) of this group about the research study.

This ED contacted Ellen, and expressed interest in learning more and possibly partnering on the project. Ellen went to meet with another member of this group, who was also an ED of a local counseling agency that serves a minority group. During this meeting, initial plans were made to coordinate a focus group interview with identified agencies that serve people of color. As Ellen brought this news back to the university and the research team, the energy was palpable, as this was the team's first real "taste" of the broader impact that this study could make.

Ellen approached the provost of the university, explaining the study and the recent interaction with key stakeholders in the community. The provost graciously offered money to provide lunches for this focus group. Up until this point, no monies had been involved in the study. As this could be seen as an inducement for participation, it was necessary for the team to revise the original IRB protocol, to reflect this new development. Ellen enlisted the assistance of her team in revising the protocol. This activity provided an opportunity for team members to move through the process of revising a research protocol in a way (in vivo, as the project took shape) that is different from most traditional classroom activities.

The team worked diligently to update the protocol and submit it to the IRB so that an expedited review might occur, and the team could meet the deadline. However, the IRB's review schedule was already established, and, consequently, the team was not able to meet the deadline. Ellen did remain in contact with these professionals, and eventually was invited to attend a board meeting during which the ED of the council allowed Ellen, and one research team member, to present the project to this group of professionals.

Following this meeting, Ellen and the team member were able to speak individually with several professionals. From these contacts, the two were introduced to another key stakeholder in the community: the director of the local human services coalition. They went to meet with this individual a few weeks later, and through this contact, were introduced to the county's Director of Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Treatment. This contact offered the researchers the opportunity to leave flyers at the regional directors' meeting, whose attendees were directors and managers of community mental health and substance abuse treatment centers in the local area.

Throughout the process of making professional contacts, Ellen and the research team members were learning about (a) the process of conducting research, (b) the time and effort required to "launch" relevant research in the community, and (c) the importance of collaboration (between universities and communities) that Schön (1995) described. Additionally, opportunities for learning were apparent throughout the actual process of gaining IRB consent for this study. These opportunities proved to be meaningful because of the "position" in the success of the current project. Team members were motivated to learn based on their investment in the "real-world relevance" of this project.

Challenges

In spite of the contacts being made, the research team had only received two responses from the agencies that had been solicited, and both of these responses were negative. Without agency consent, the research team was unable to query individual participants by word of mouth. Almost six months had passed by this time, and the motivation level of individual team members was fluctuating. In fact, Ellen was becoming discouraged with the lack of progress in recruiting. Because of her frustrations, she began to reach out to other colleagues regarding the notion of obtaining “organizational consent” prior to recruiting participants. The consensus among Ellen’s professional colleagues was that this policy was not relevant in this context because the identified population of participants was not a “vulnerable” population (clinicians working in professional roles with consumers of CMHSA treatment). So Ellen and the team decided to query the university’s IRB regarding this policy in the context of the proposed project.

This was a pivotal point for Ellen, as a faculty member, and for the team. First, Ellen viewed the opportunity to address the IRB as a moment of significant professional development, as a first-year faculty member. Second, Ellen perceived that this particular step in the process would be a learning opportunity for team members. The team was frustrated. There was a desire to collect data, but, after six months, no opportunity. The sentiment was that we were all “in this together” now, and team members expressed interest in addressing the problem while maintaining the integrity of the project. The process of experiencing this frustration was important in the team’s development. Bandura (1986) discussed the influence of *affective arousal* as it relates to an individual’s learning. This same concept of *affective arousal* has been explored in the counselor education literature (e.g., Carruth & Woodside, 2010; Larson, 1998; Leach & Stoltenberg, 1997). In the current context, *affective arousal* (i.e., frustration) served to motivate the team: the shared experience of frustration allowed the team to investigate the problem collaboratively.

First, Ellen tasked individual team members with reviewing the Belmont Report (1979), which is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ report on the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects. This activity provided the team with an opportunity to co-construct a rationale for querying the policy of “organization consent” in the context of the current study (i.e., “Finding Their Voice”). Team members discussed their

interpretations of the document, and the general consensus was that this particular university policy may have been set in place to protect “vulnerable participants,” such as individuals under the age of eighteen, or individuals with a mental illness. In the current study, the identified population of participants was not inherently vulnerable. Team members were able to conceptualize the ethical duty of respecting the autonomy of participants as coming into conflict with this particular policy. That is, by seeking organizational consent prior to individual participant consent, were we not *causing* participants to become vulnerable, in the sense that their anonymity would not be protected from their employer? According to the Belmont Report (1979), “even if individual researchers are treating their research subjects fairly, and even if IRBs are taking care to assure that subjects are selected fairly within a particular institution, unjust social patterns may nevertheless appear in the overall distribution of burdens and benefits of research” (p. 9). During discussions with the team, Ellen found opportunities to provide specific instruction regarding ethics in human subjects’ research that may not have occurred in the context of the traditional classroom.

With information from these discussions in hand, Ellen approached the IRB. In querying the policy, Ellen learned that it was, in fact, in place to protect vulnerable participants. In working through discussions with the co-chair of the IRB, Ellen discovered that the language in the original IRB protocol was not clear regarding the intended recruiting strategies. After this discussion, Ellen was encouraged by the co-chair to resubmit the protocol to the IRB, and clarify the intent with recruiting. The IRB reviewed this draft of the protocol, and approved a “word of mouth” recruiting strategy. While the apparent “frustrations” of the team members were related to the inability to successfully gain agency consent, the lesson learned here for Ellen and for her team was about the importance of clarity in describing the research to the IRB. John Dewey (1897) described the necessity for the instructor to become a collaborative partner in the learning process so that students can *independently discover* meaning. Dewey’s notion of “learning by doing” still holds true in higher education today.

Current Status

At the time of this writing, the research team has scheduled its first interview, and members of the team have recently presented at a national

professional conference on the lessons learned during an action-research project. The project has taken on a life of its own. While there have been a number of frustrations throughout, the learning has been significant. Having the opportunity to explore a problem that is relevant to the profession and the local community is immeasurably beneficial for all involved. Some of the benefits are discussed below.

What Is “Real-World” Research?

“I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand”
(Chinese proverb)

For Ellen and her team, moving through the “messy” process of exploring a real-world problem (the impact of budget cuts on client recovery) provided opportunities to engage in “spontaneous” learning. The team was composed of students and recent graduates in the counseling psychology program; they were studying to become mental health counselors. For this group, this particular “problem” was highly relevant, as it represented the professional context into which they were moving.

Scholars have explained the need for relevance in research (e.g., Schön, 1995), and others have encouraged researchers to use action-research methods to bridge the “research-practitioner gap” in the counseling profession (Guiffreda et al, 2011). These scholars make the case that “real-world” research is, in effect, a shift away from the theoretical, toward the practical. “Real-world” research indicates investigation of problems that exist in communities; its very essence implies social action. The notion of *social action* is strongly correlated with the work of Lewin (1946, 1951). Snyder (2009) described social action as a set of activities that individuals can use to address the problems of society; one such activity being action research.

Action Research

In addition to the concept of *social action*, action research (AR) as a method of investigation was first described by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. One of the primary tenets of his work was that it is possible for theory and practice to be in symbiotic relationship, where one informs the other

(Snyder, 2009). AR has been implemented in numerous disciplines since its original inception. As the method has increased in popularity, scholars have defined the approach differently, depending on the nature of their discipline. Consequently, Bradbury and Reason (2003) believed that AR may be best understood as a collection of research approaches.

To illustrate the variety of iterations in the conception of AR, four dominant varieties of AR have been identified by O’Brien (1988). These include traditional action research, contextual action research, radical action research, and educational action research. Traditional action research has roots in organizational psychology and generally encompasses the use of T-groups to solicit information from stakeholders. This is often specific to business settings. Contextual action research is also referred to as “action learning” and is intended to minimize power differentials and emphasize ownership among all participants. In this viewpoint, participants are encouraged to view themselves as co-creators of research (rather than simply as respondents). Radical action research is a subset of action research. It has the stated goal of working toward social transformation and engaging participants in self-advocacy. Finally, educational action research is a method that is specific to educational reform. It often consists of university-based researchers working directly with teachers in primary and secondary educational settings. Tools implemented in action research include surveys, journaling about research activities, structured and unstructured interviews, reviewing autobiographies, debriefing research participants, and conducting focus groups (O’Brien, 1988; Jordi, 2011).

While numerous iterations of AR have been described in various disciplines, for the purposes of this discussion and this project, Lewin’s model of AR was implemented (Lewin, 1946). He defined AR as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 34). Extending this original work, Bargal (2008) outlined the principles of AR based on Lewin’s work as follows:

1. Action research combines a systematic study, sometimes experimental, of a social problem as well as the endeavors to solve it.
2. Action research includes a spiral process of data collection to determine goals, action to implement goals, and assessment of the results of the intervention.
3. Action research requires feedback of the results of intervention to all parties involved in the research.

4. Action research implies continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners.
5. Action research relies on the principles of group dynamics and is anchored in its change phases. The phases are unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Decision making is mutual and is carried out in a public way.
6. Action research takes into account issues of values, objectives, and power needs of the parties involved.
7. Action research serves to create knowledge, to formulate principles of intervention, and to develop instruments for selection, intervention, and training.
8. Within the framework of action research, there is an emphasis on the recruitment, training, and support of the change agents (p. 19).

Several of these principles are relevant to the current discussion. First, this study (i.e., “Finding Their Voice”) requires “continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners” (Bargal, 2008, p. 19). Members of the research team have different levels of involvement with practitioners. Some have personal relationships with professionals in the field, and are using their knowledge of professionals to recruit participants for the focus groups. Other members are employed in the field presently and have unique knowledge of current issues that affect practitioners. Second, the current study is also in keeping with Lewin’s conception of AR in that this project is exploratory in nature, and one of the possible outcomes will be the creation of new knowledge (i.e., the impact of budget cuts on consumers of mental health counseling). Additionally, the results of this initial exploration may lead to the creation of survey instruments designed to target a broader audience of practitioners. The expected outcome of this phase of the research will be to provide statistical data to key stakeholders and decision makers regarding the effect of budget cuts on consumers of community mental health.

Why Should We Use AR in Counselor Education Programs?

Early leaders in educational and social thought (e.g., Dewey, 1897; Lewin, 1946) espoused the benefits of learning in vivo. Specific to this discussion, AR is one method of learning in vivo and it is particularly well

suited to counselor education programs, given that this process encourages collaboration among professionals in an attempt to address the problems that directly affect them. Additionally, McLeod (1999; as cited in Guiffreda et al., 2011) encouraged the use of AR in counseling because of the emphasis on skills that are inherent in the counseling process (e.g., reflection, collaboration, and meaning making). In thinking about the need for AR in counselor education programs, two important considerations are (a) the current curriculum standards, as defined by CACREP (2009), and (b) the value of experiential learning in counselor education programs (Paisley & Hayes, 2000).

Curriculum Standards

As mentioned previously, CACREP is the nationally recognized accreditation body for graduate counseling programs. Several CACREP standards are relevant to the inclusion of action research in counselor education programs. First, according to the 2009 standards, programs are to instruct students in research methods that include “qualitative, quantitative, single-case designs, action research and outcomes-based research” (CACREP Standard II.8.b, 2009). If AR is viewed as a “collection of research activities” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003), then it seems to address this particular standard well, as the inclusion of qualitative activities, quantitative activities, single-case design, and outcomes-based activities could all fall under the banner of AR activities.

Furthermore, CACREP standards specify that an individual entering the field of professional mental health counseling “understands effective strategies to support client advocacy and influence public policy and government relations on local, state and national levels to enhance equity, increase funding, and promote programs that affect the practice of clinical mental health counseling” (CACREP, 2009, CMHC, E.4). By Lewin’s (1946) original description, AR is situated in social action. The current project has provided opportunities for the research team to become aware of and involved in local advocacy efforts. The inclusion of AR into counselor education programs may provide opportunities for program faculty to bridge a needed gap between community outreach and academic work. For example, in the current study, the research team had an opportunity to meet with the executive director of a local human services coalition.

This meeting served multiple purposes. First, it allowed the research team to discuss the project with an important member of the professional community. Second, it allowed the researcher to introduce the director to the counseling program at her university, and to offer options for possible future collaborations. One example of the potential for collaboration was that this executive director had knowledge of a number of community health agencies in the area nearby the university. As the university had recently relocated, a new counseling center had opened in conjunction with the university. The researcher wrote letters to these community health agencies, inviting them to refer clients for counseling who had little ability to pay for services at more traditional mental health centers. Hence, the program and the community both stand to benefit from this initial collaboration.

Lastly, CACREP standards include a number of mandates regarding the importance of advocacy and social justice. These standards state that the counseling professional “knows public policies on the local, state and national levels that affect the quality and accessibility of mental health services” (CACREP, 2009, CMHC, E.6) and “advocates for policies programs, and services that are equitable and responsive to the unique needs of clients” (CACREP, 2009, CMHC, F.2). Through implementing action research in counselor education, faculty members ensure that multiple standards are addressed, and more importantly, they model for students the spirit of the language of the standards: to engage in social justice within the field of counseling.

Experiential Learning

Paisley and Hayes (2000) described the significance of experiential learning in their discussion of constructivist counselor education. These scholars asserted that “people are able to reason in increasingly complex and abstract ways and that their understanding of experience is embedded in a social context” (p. 82). It stands to reason that social learning is likely to influence the development of cognitive complexity, which has been mentioned as a desirable trait among counseling professionals (e.g., Holloway & Wolleat, 1980; Spengler & Strohmer, 1994; Walker & Spengler, 1995). Cognitively complex counselors possess the ability to hold multiple, sometimes disparate, points of view simultaneously, in order to reach

conclusions in conceptualizations about their clients. If situating students in a “real-world” learning context promotes cognitive complexity, then the potential benefits of engaging in AR can be corroborated further.

The idea of learning in a social context has a long history in developmental psychology. Notably, Bandura postulated a theory of social learning in 1977. In this work, he introduced the notion of *self-efficacy*, which has been cited frequently as a desired trait for counselors (e.g., Leach & Stoltenberg, 1997; Lent, Hill, & Hoffman, 2003; Lent, Hoffman, Hill, Treistman, Mount, & Singley, 2006; O’Brien & Heppner, 1996).

Self-efficacy, or the ability to believe that you are capable of performing in a certain situation, is influenced by four factors: (1) mastery, (2) modeling, (3) social persuasion, and (4) affective arousal (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Of these factors, Bandura named *mastery*, or performing an action repeatedly until the behavior becomes automatic, as the most influential factor. Second to this was the notion of *modeling*; watching another, more skilled person, complete the behavior. Third, Bandura described the notion of *social persuasion* as influential on the development of self-efficacy. This speaks to the importance of situating learning experiences in social contexts, as is the case in the current discussion. Finally, Bandura asserted that *affective arousal* was influential in the development of self-efficacy. That is, the degree to which a person experiences anxiety associated with performing a new behavior will influence that person’s self-efficacy (Larson, 1998).

For the research team, Bandura’s theory was evident on multiple levels. For Ellen, there was an awareness of her position as a leader in regards to her research team members, and an awareness of their “eyes” on her during this process. Meaning, Ellen was embarking upon a new role; one that she had not assumed prior to this project. With this new role came a level of *affective arousal*. Ellen recognized that her team was dependent on her to assume a position of authority. Ellen was also aware of the influence of *social persuasion* on her own learning. This was especially relevant as the team members collectively decided to challenge the IRB’s policy regarding organizational consent. Because Ellen was aware of the frustrations of her team members, she learned an important lesson. In order to effectively facilitate a meaningful learning environment, there were times in which she needed to assume a position of authority, and there were other times in which she needed to step down from that position, so to speak. bel hooks (1994) reminded readers that “seeing

the classroom as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (p. 8). Regarding the IRB issue, Ellen enlisted the assistance of all of her team members. She asked each to review the Belmont Report, and to provide their interpretations of the report in the current context. Members of the team discovered nuances in the Belmont Report that Ellen had missed. This particular point in the overall process was quite significant for members of the team, as each individual had an opportunity to share his or her views on the topic. This process allowed the team to learn about institution review in a meaningful way, based on the frustrations and motivations experienced by members of the team.

In their journals, members of the research team discussed their own frustrations with the IRB issue, and they also reported appreciation for Ellen’s willingness to persist in finding a solution to this particular predicament. *Modeling* (Bandura, 1986) became relevant during this process, as Ellen was in a position to teach—through actions—the appropriate way to handle a policy disagreement in a professional and ethical manner.

In sum, different factors (mastery, modeling, social persuasion, and affective arousal) affected different team members in different ways at different points. Ellen was motivated by affective arousal; team members were motivated by modeling. What’s important here is to remember that creating a space in which learning can occur is at the essence of learning in a social context. In her discussion of *Communities of Practice*, Wenger (1998) challenged readers by asking:

What if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? . . . What if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? (p. 3)

How Do We Promote Authentic Learning?

Situating learning outside of the classroom (Wenger, 1998) in order to meet the call to become “agents of social change” (Lee & Hipolito-Degado, 2007) may seem to be a daunting task for educators. However, many

scholars have espoused the benefits of community engagement and service learning (e.g., DePrince, Priebe, & Taylor-Newton, 2011; Soslau & Yost, 2007; Woodside, Carruth, Clapp, & Robertson, 2006) as a means of promoting authentic learning.

Service Learning

Service learning is one strategy for promoting authentic learning. Service learning involves infusing curriculum with community engagement. Students engage in real-world learning outside of the theoretical confines of the traditional classroom. Instead of studying about problems, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in the social context of the problem. This immersion promotes a number of skills for students who will

- learn to translate theory into practice,
- explore the possibilities of their profession (Woodside et al., 2006),
- have opportunities to increase their learning and contribute to their community,
- have opportunities to make real-life connections to the subject matter (Soslau & Yost, 2007), and
- likely improve their critical thinking skills in relation to their peers (DePrince et al., 2011).

Given these benefits, and the importance of AR in counseling programs, it seems apropos to consider the inclusion of AR activities as strategies for service learning and social action. As mentioned earlier, scholars have defined AR in numerous ways, and as a result, many different iterations of the ways in which AR might be included in a curriculum could be inferred. Service learning projects might be one way that educators could implement AR into counselor education programs.

In the current study, members of the research team discussed several of the benefits of this project. Members found involvement in the process of research to be personally and professionally relevant, and their responses support the importance of learning in a social environment. For example, when asked how being involved in this project has informed the way they

were thinking about being counselors and working in the field, members reported the following:

- “I learned about all of the possible directions I could focus my efforts postgraduation.”
- “The potential for exploring human behavior is exciting.”
- “I appreciate the opportunity to participate in work that might make positive social change.”
- “I understand the relevance of research to practice.”
- “I am hopeful that this work might inform legislature.”
- “Being on this team validates the work I do with clients.”

Team members also discussed the particular benefits that they saw from involvement in this project. Members reported the following:

- “The opportunity allows me to explore my own personal interests [in research] in a safe, supportive, and encouraging environment.”
- “I love learning from other people.”
- “Understanding how much work is involved in the research process is enlightening as I prepare for my doctoral studies.”
- “Being a part of a group of people who have the same interests is a great feeling.”
- “This research directly looks at client needs and offers hope and direction for the mental health system.”

In this project, promoting authentic learning through action research was dependent, in part, on the commitment and motivation of the instructor (Ellen). The students involved in the process reflected on their appreciation for Ellen and her commitment to this work, and Ellen reflected similarly in her journal:

The benefits for me are immeasurable. First, I have found my “sea legs,” so to speak, as far as facilitating a research group. I have learned valuable lessons regarding the times when my own personal insecurities held me back from pushing through and being appropriately assertive. I’ve learned more and more about research methods through the need to communicate these things to my team. I’ve learned to embrace the role of “leader” even though I strive to maintain a collaborative environment. I’ve enjoyed knowing my students

and team members on a different level. I’ve enjoyed the co-construction of knowledge that we’ve experienced—the Belmont Report, for example. I’ve been able to have firsthand experience in community involvement, and I am learning to respect the position of my work in the larger community. In fact, I’ve learned that my work has a place in the larger community. This work has provided purpose for me. I am motivated to do this.

In reflection, Ellen’s learning during this process was centered on her perceived ethical duty. For Ellen, modeling (Bandura, 1986) ethically responsible conduct was of paramount importance throughout the process. As such, several ethical considerations come to mind that are relevant to this discussion of promoting authentic learning.

Ethical Considerations

In the current study, a number of ethical issues have been encountered. For example, as is the case with all research, the primary ethical duty of the research team has been to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and anonymity of the research participants. In this particular study, the method of data collection is the focus group interview. According to Morgan (1988), the very nature of the focus group impairs the researchers’ ability to protect the anonymity of participants. Teaching members of the research team the importance of protecting human subjects, ensuring confidentiality, and adhering to specific methods of recruiting and communicating with participants allowed the students to comprehend the essence of these ethical guidelines in a unique way.

Also, the process of bracketing the research team (described above) provided significant opportunities for Ellen to offer instruction regarding ethical considerations during the collection of data and the reporting of results. Framing the importance of the bracketing interview early in the process allowed for team members to enter into each further step from a position of awareness of the potential for bias to enter into the discussion.

“Finding Their Voice” provided opportunities for learning that have been situated in a contextually relevant environment. As the authors have described above, the potential benefits for counselor education are

significant. Other disciplines have also espoused the benefits of AR; these are mentioned briefly, below.

Application beyond Counselor Education

Action research has been utilized in a variety of disciplines ranging from business to education and health care. The advantages consistently noted by researchers include the inherent empowerment of shifting the focus to inclusivity, respect for stakeholders, and the “real-world” applications generated by the process.

Marketing, product development, manufacturing, organizational change, information systems, accounting, small business, and management have all implemented action research to address issues ranging from productivity to employee compliance (Puhakainen & Siponen, 2010). Emerging data documenting action-research projects in developing nations suggest its adaptability across cultures. For example, Gedeon (2011) described the use of action research in teaching business ethics in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Erdener (2011) conducted similar research in Central Asia. Molina, Aguirre, Breceda, and Cambero (2011) investigated developing technology parks in Mexico also using action research. Action research is attractive to managers in the business sector as it encourages ownership of ideas for both researchers and stakeholders. Action research collapses variables of specific business practices and provides flexibility for data collection (Baskerville, 1999).

The field of education has generated considerable action research. Through action research, educators, students, parents, and academic faculty have identified and fleshed out solutions to a myriad of issues including inequality and the effects of high-stakes testing. A review of the literature indicates that action research might be (a) utilized to examine parents’ pedagogical expectations (Lam & Kwong, 2012) and (b) implemented to transform physical education (Enright, 2012).

Action research has also been used in health-care settings to involve both practitioners and patients in the process of evaluating and changing services. Collaboration in health care has generated action-research data ranging from understanding the experiences of Somali women in the American health-care system (Pavlish, Noor, & Brandt, 2010) to health education in England (MacFarlane, Singleton, & Green, 2009) and provisions for

health care with indigenous communities (Kendall, Sunderland, Barnett, Nalder, & Matthews, 2011).

Conclusion

Using action research as a way to promote authentic learning has a long history in education (e.g., Kurt Lewin, 1946). In this chapter, the authors have described action research as a collection of activities that is beneficial for higher education programs, including counselor education. The educational benefits of this type of research include (a) meeting curriculum standards (e.g., CACREP) in a creative way, (b) providing opportunities for real-world learning, (c) teaching research methods that can influence professional practice, (d) engaging in social action, (e) fostering collaborative relationships between universities and communities, and (f) infusing advocacy and social justice into the curriculum. Students involved in the current project have had the opportunity to learn about possible directions to pursue postgraduation and have had the opportunity to participate in a project that they find to be meaningful and relevant to their future work. The research team, which includes students, alumni (new professionals), and faculty have commented on the benefits of the collaborative nature of the current project, and how being involved with a group of like-minded individuals is enjoyable and motivating. As faculty members are continuously tasked with promoting educational opportunities that provide relevance to the workplace, action research can occupy a position of encouraging relevant learning experiences for students regardless of the discipline.

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