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Theatre-in-the-Round: The Art of Effectively Teaching Group Counselling Skills Using Role-play

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Abstract

This chapter will detail the process of teaching group psychotherapy skills in an experiential classroom setting modelled on theatre-in-the-round and the process of evolving role-play to a higher level of realism by incorporating scriptwriting strategies and improvisation from the disciplines of drama and theatre. The use of scriptwriting and improvisation provides richer client profiles for classmates playing group members and clearer direction on their roles in the evolving process and content of the group session. In addition, the classroom setting was transformed into a

theatre-in-the-round venue to provide observing students a closer intimacy with the demonstration of group counselling by their classmates, focusing their attention on both group process and content and enhancing their feedback observations to the group leader.

The Art of Effectively Teaching Group Counselling Skills Using Role-play

If there was a testimonial for the value and effectiveness of using role-play as a learning strategy, this student's reflection on her experience is a positive confirmation of why role-play is an integral component of student skill development:

The group counselling role-play was a great learning experience for me. The opportunity to play the role of group counsellor in an actual group counselling setting gave me a chance to get the feel of what a real group therapy session would be like. I was able to discover myself and my style as a counsellor. It gave me an understanding of how theory is put into practice. (Personal Communication, 2015)

And yet, some students don't look forward to role-plays or may have not had a positive experience participating in role-play exercises. Inadequate focus on the identified learning objectives, the lack of planning to develop scenarios that can be perceived as realistic, and the inability of student participants to stay in character become barriers to effective learning during role-play exercises. This chapter will detail the process of teaching group psychotherapy skills in an experiential classroom setting modelled on theatre-in-the-round and the process of evolving role-play to a higher level of realism by incorporating scriptwriting strategies and improvisation from the disciplines of drama and theatre.

Role-playing is a teaching strategy that is utilized in experiential learning and considered effective for learning about complex social and human systems (Russell & Shepherd, 2010). It engages students in complex scenarios where they can apply their knowledge and experience and multiple points of view through their experience and feedback from peers and instructor. Role-playing across helping professional disciplines is considered

a powerful technique for teaching clinical skills and assisting students in reflecting on their values and beliefs about counselling and clients. When effective, the benefits of role-playing are that it promotes deep-learning outcomes that are retained by students (Bolten & Heathcote, 1999), engages students in active learning, and promotes problem solving and skill development relevant to the professional domain (Hou, 2012).

For role-play to be effective in the context of learning counselling skills and techniques, participants need to demonstrate specific tasks so the interaction can replicate the real-life scenario. Students in the role of group counsellor need to focus on the learning objectives of the course and demonstrate the required clinical skills. Students in the role of group participant need to stay congruent with their character's role. The quality of the learning experience depends on the level of realism that is dependent on the participants' understanding of their roles and the context of the scenario. Dieckmann, Manser, Wehner, and Rall (2007) conducted a study of students' perceptions of real and fictional cues in role-play simulations and discovered that students' engagement was strongly influenced by the role-playing competency of the participants. They stated that the highest level of realism is only achieved when participants are properly trained.

Most instructors can easily relate to the poorly planned and unrealistic role-play that deteriorates quickly because the participants were uncertain of the assigned role and unfamiliar with the scenario context. Introverted students can easily become overwhelmed with being the center of attention and become preoccupied with not making a mistake while extroverted students take center stage and hijack the role-play scenario to become the center of attention. In other situations students confused with how to portray the role may step out of character and default to disclosing their own experience or perception of the identified role-play issue, raising ethical issues of inappropriate self-disclosure and the potential to place students at emotional risk.

Enhancing the Level of Role-play Realism

The development of role playing scenarios for this group counselling course evolved from the premise posed by Rudolph, Simon, and Raemer (2007) that the technical and logical realism of the role-play is dictated by the simulation platform and setting and that the quality of the role-playing

by participants strongly determines the psychological and emotional fidelity of the role-play. As Sanko, Shekhter, Kyle, Di Benedetto, and Birnbach (2013) emphasized, “participants must perform their part upholding the character’s role, the lesson objectives and the realism of the scenario” (p. 215) in order for the role-play to be effective as a learning strategy.

With the goal of promoting a higher level of role-play realism and to provide adequate training for participants, students are assigned the role of group counsellor and develop the role-play scenario. Based on their research assignment of developing a proposal for group counselling for a specific population presenting with a specific problem, the role-play is developed to be congruent with the lived experience of those clients.

The students’ first task is to develop their role-play to replicate a 50-minute group counselling session that they develop for their group counselling proposal. Their next task is to conduct the role-play to demonstrate all the course learning objectives. The course learning objectives are to: (a) effectively lead a group psychotherapy session by managing both the content and the process that evolves between group members and between group members and the group leader; (b) effectively demonstrate group counselling skills; and (c) successfully engage group participants in problem solving. Replicating a complete group counselling session as opposed to compartmentalizing the learning objectives into separate role-plays further promotes a higher level of realism. Across the course, student participants and the peer observation group experience the process of counselling from engagement to the working problem resolution stage to the termination of the group.

Scriptwriting and Improvisation

Students are introduced to and incorporate the use of theatre and acting methodology to enhance the realism of role-play scenarios (Sanko et al., 2013; Barney & Shea, 2007; Smith, 2009; Sheperd, 2002). In particular, students are coached in the techniques of scriptwriting and improvisation and how to incorporate them into role-play development to provide richer client profiles for classmates playing group members and clearer direction on their roles in the evolving process and content of the group session.

Scriptwriting

Group participants are provided a narrative back-story that includes the contributing social and emotional factors that contribute to the presenting problem. In addition, participants are assigned a specific problem group behavior that is congruent with their presenting problem behavior. This poses a challenge to the group counsellor to intervene effectively to promote continued healthy group progress. Including the techniques of scriptwriting in role-plays promotes realistic scenarios, supports the inclusion of scenarios that are more challenging, and provides opportunities to practice advanced counselling skills. For example, including a client profile that is resistant to participating in the group process provides the group counsellor experience in dealing with conflict and group cohesion. Additionally, including deeper emotional content that poses issues of risk to the individual or group members provides the group counsellors experience with assessing and intervening in situations where the individual discloses suicidal ideation or harm to their children.

As one student in the role of group counsellor reflected:

It is easy to write a back-story to set the stage for group participants to display behavior and emotion congruent to their character. It is quite another thing to watch in amazement as the story unfolds with real emotions and behaviors that at times are so visceral you believe the setting is real. (Personal Communication, 2015)

Improvisation

Improvisation is defined as the act of improvising, or of composing, uttering, executing, or arranging anything without previous preparation (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Students are introduced to the improvisational concepts of playing, letting oneself fail, listening, collaborating, and playing the game by following the rules. In the context of the group counselling role-play, the game is group counselling and the rules are following the script and staying in character. In the process of improvisation, rules free up the individual to improvise by guiding their impulses and funneling their creativity (Morris, 2011).

Theatre-in-the-round

The theatre-in-the-round provides more than just a setting to replicate the traditional teaching format of a double-fish bowl arrangement where half the class observes and half the class participates as group members. Transforming the classroom into a theatre-in-the-round venue provides students with the experience of closer intimacy with the demonstration of group counselling by their classmates and focuses their attention on both group process and content, enhancing the feedback observations to the group counsellors.

The theatre-in-the-round is intended to provide a metaphor of an ongoing play where students are immersed into the action where they observe and participate in the evolution of group process from the engagement session to the working stages of group counselling to the termination stage of a group. In essence, the learning takes place in the experience of a number of acts within a play where students experience the process of group from the perspective of participant and audience. Following each group counselling demonstration, students are engaged in an actors' workshop where the process and content of group are evaluated, where the group counsellor is given feedback by observers and participants on the effectiveness of their skills and interventions, and where feedback is given on how to improve future groups to increase the realism and believability.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a narrative of the process of evolving role-play to a higher level of realism in a group counselling course through the use of theatre and arts methodology of scriptwriting and improvisation. The incorporation of scriptwriting provides rich role descriptions and a specific narrative of each client's possible lived experience. It provides the participants a script with which to stay in character and enhance the realism of the role-play scenario. Participants are encouraged to let the characters become them as opposed to just playing a role. In addition, they are coached to improvise in relation to the interaction

between themselves and other group participants and their interaction with the group co-leaders and not to ad lib what they imagine the clients' lived experience might be.

Lastly, an unexpected benefit of transforming the classroom into a theatre-in-the-round venue is that the students' feedback of being a participant or an observer became a conversation of what is their most significant learning and an identification of missed opportunities to demonstrate a skill as opposed to critical feedback on errors in counselling technique or group process.

The outcome of incorporating the techniques of scriptwriting and improvisation in the context of theatre-in-the round resulted in a strong correlation between the realistic quality of the role-plays and achievement of the course learning outcomes. As one student in the role of group counsellor reflected:

Overall, I am so happy to have participated in this assignment. Although a little freaked out at first, it allowed me to practice, this being something I truly value. The whole assignment combined (proposal and role-play) gave me a true sense of work as a group counselor which is something I appreciate. Sometimes we are taught things that apply nicely in the classroom, but when trying to apply them to the real world we don't have the same tool set. With this project, I believe it allowed me to integrate into our learning real-life skills. There may have been some mistakes along the way, but these mistakes only helped me to know how to be better. (Personal Communication, 2015)

The outcome is at this point anecdotal evidence. The test of the anecdotal narrative is to apply a more systematic investigation to determine if the application of theatre and acting methodology improves the skill development of students and if the process of developing as realistic as possible role-plays enhances the achievement of learning objectives. Future research is needed to provide empirical evidence of whether enhanced, more realistic role-play is any more effective than traditional role-play.

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