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Counseling Lab I (PCMF 502) City as Classroom Project Report

Michael Sude PhD

La Salle University, sudem@lasalle.edu

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Classroom Project

Using the City and Region as an Instructional Resource

Michael Sude, Assistant Professor, Psychology

Course Description

PCMF 502: Counseling Lab I

This graduate level laboratory course is designed to develop the basic counseling skills that will enable students to understand the client, to develop a trusting relationship with the client, and to facilitate the client's self-exploration. This course will be hands-on and experiential, and there will be several opportunities throughout to practice clinical skills. Although both individual and family counseling will be emphasized, the course will retain a systemic theoretical focus. This course is designed to help students begin their journey toward professional development, and will focus on elements of the self of the therapist, ethics, as well as issues of diversity and social justice in treating clients.



Project Description

Self of the Therapist: Awareness and Context

Students spent one hour or more at two different locations: one within their comfort zone, and one outside of their comfort zone. The only requirements were that these places be within the city limits of Philadelphia, and that the one out of their comfort zone differed from how students identified in at least one sociocultural way (race, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion/spirituality). Students were required to journal about their experiences, in the form of video documentary. Since they were required to have video cameras to tape class role-plays for other assignments, they were instructed to bring their video cameras with them to their locations to document their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their time there (or directly after if they were unable to film directly at the location). Conducting the 3-5 minute video journals for each location was designed to document the experience immediately, and watching the video journals was designed to help write the accompanying reflection paper.

The assigned reflection paper (5-page maximum) about this experience explored students' thoughts and feelings about being both in and out of their comfort zones. Students were asked to pay attention to their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors while out at their locations, which were crystalized in the video journals. In the papers, they were asked to reflect on the similarities and differences in their reactions to being in these two locations: what they noticed, what surprised them, and what they learned about themselves through this process. In the conclusion of the paper, they were asked to relate this experience to the process of meeting with different types of clients. The premise was that being a therapist often requires being outside of one's comfort zone, and this was an experiential activity to help access reactions to that experience. Students were asked to turn both their video journals and reflection papers in to the instructor. I was able to do some minor quantitative and further qualitative analysis of the results of this activity, and they are reported below.

Outcomes

Chosen Locations Within Comfort Zone

- Schuylkill Banks trail
- Philadelphia Museum of Art
- Friend's apartment in South Philadelphia
- Night darkened back yard
- Campus apartment
- Olive Garden
- Philadelphia Schuylkill Fairmount Park dog run
- St. Stephan's Green (restaurant)
- Holy Temple Church of God in Christ
- La Salle University Football Field

Chosen Locations Outside of Comfort Zone

- Church
- Hunting Park
- Going for a run in Germantown
- Sports bar
- Watching a football game at friend's brother's home
- Oasis Gentlemen's Club
- High school football game
- Olney Transportation Zone
- Masjid
- Our Lady of Hope Church

Quantitative Analysis

Of the places outside of students' comfort zones based on differences in identified sociocultural factors, 30% chose places based on religion/spirituality, 30% based on gender, 30% based on race/socioeconomic class, and 10% based on sexual orientation.

Qualitative Analysis

The results were generally positive. Students, even ones who admitted in their papers that they were skeptical about the usefulness of the assignment, seemed to learn from it. There was a mix in the level of risk-taking in choosing the location outside of their comfort zones. Some students took minimal risk in choosing their locations and seemed to just want to get the assignment over with, which in itself is a reflection of their feelings about being outside of their comfort zone. Other students reported wanting to make the most of the experience and try something that they would normally not try if they were not pushed by the assignment. It seemed, as expected, that the students who took larger risks learned more about themselves through the assignment.

Student Feedback

One interesting result was that many students reported learning more about the helpfulness of their chosen place of comfort in addition to the experience of being out of their comfort zone. Another interesting result was that several students reported feeling more comfortable with their chosen place of discomfort with the time spent there. Furthermore, several students were able to make connections between doing this assignment and dealing with their own discomfort in treating certain clinical presenting issues or client-populations. A few students even commented on having more empathy or understanding for clients coming to therapy and being out of their own comfort zones with the therapist.

One unexpected difficulty was the discomfort with videotaping their reactions during or directly after the experiences at both locations. Many students reported discomfort being videotaped, and that this discomfort added to some of the tension and anxiety in completing the assignment. The primary purpose of the videotaping was to capture immediate reactions to the process in addition to thoughts and feelings processed hours and/or days later while writing the accompanying reflection paper. A smaller, secondary purpose was for students to learn to use their video cameras so that they would be prepared to use them in class for their own therapist role-plays. Since there was some anxiety about being videotaped, the assignment actually gave students a bit of practice being on camera before they had to videotape themselves as therapists in class.

As stated above, several students were skeptical about the usefulness of the assignment, and some were apprehensive about the videotaping. However, most reported that they were surprised at what they learned about themselves through the experience. One student reported that she was able to find a new appreciation for devoutly religious individuals. She realized that church was “the place they feel safe and secure,” just like her park bench. As a result, she reported feeling less judgmental. Another student commented on the familiarity of the place of comfort, as if it was a “sign that says, ‘Welcome, you are now entering a safe area.’”

One student reported feeling “like an outsider,” “embarrassed,” and “guilty” for having more socioeconomic privilege than those who lived in the chosen location outside of her comfort zone. Another student commented on being the only person of that gender in the chosen location of discomfort, and wondered “what kind of assumptions” the others were making about her.

Another interesting experience was from a student who reported that a woman from another ethnic background asked to pray with her, and said to her “don’t worry, I won’t hurt you.” The student commented on the woman’s perception that the student looked or felt unsafe being outside of her comfort zone, although she reported not feeling threatened by the woman or the request. The student also reported engaging in prayer with the stranger even though she does not normally pray. She reported surprising herself with this decision.

Lessons Learned

I firmly believe that learning to tolerate the anxiety and intensity of being outside of one's comfort zone is an essential skill for therapists and counselors. I believe this because I believe that we as clinicians need to be able to hold whatever the clients bring into the therapy space, even if it leads us to feel discomfort. We also need to model tolerating this intensity and anxiety for clients in order to be able to genuinely push them during the therapy process.

If I give this assignment again, I may require students to show their video journals to the class and process their reactions with their classmates, rather than require a reflection paper. I believe that the dialogue about the experiences and students' reactions to them could be a valuable learning experience for all of us. I realize that there is a chance for some students to take less risk because of fearing reactions from their peers, but it is something that I would at least be willing to try. I am glad though that as it was written originally, it seemed to offer a valuable learning experience to many students about being inside and outside of their comfort zones.