

Full Length Research

Integrating Acting Techniques and Human Services Education

¹James Ruby, PhD and ²Nanci Carol Ruby, MFA

Corresponding Authors' Addresses and E-mails:

¹Professor of Human Services, California State University, Fullerton, United States of America. jruby@fullerton.edu

²Adjunct Faculty, California State University, Fullerton, United States of America. nruby@fullerton.edu

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Human Service professionals are trained in many standards designed to assist a variety of populations. At a large public state university, a class was created that incorporates acting exercises and psychodrama techniques into the work of human services professionals. Actor training emphasizes honesty and mindfulness in the moment, as well as collaboration with others. Human Services education echoes these themes, but for different ends. The course investigated in this study attempted to wed those emphases. Learning outcomes for the course centered on professional practice techniques and increased self-awareness. The purpose of the study was to determine if desired student outcomes were achieved. A thematic analysis of student responses shows that class participants experienced growth in both professional and personal domains. Suggestions for further investigation are also recommended.

Keywords: Psychodrama, acting, experiential education, human services

INTRODUCTION

Human Service educators have the unique challenge of introducing students to helping skills while encouraging them to grow emotionally. One path for meeting this challenge is through the use of experiential education techniques.

Quality communication is foundational for the field of counseling; it is also a core skill for the field of acting. This article will discuss a course, Integrating Acting and Psychodrama Techniques into Human Services, taught at a large state university. The course synthesizes the fields of Acting and Human Services in an interactive classroom format. The educational space itself becomes both stage and laboratory. The students invest in improvisation, voice work, enactments, personal narratives, family monologues, mindfulness, speaking truth in the moment, reflecting without judgment, and connection to powerful text. Students learn by doing,

observing and by supporting classmates in these various approaches. The authors will review student responses to ex post facto, qualitative questions designed to assess the potential impact of a counseling course based on acting techniques and psychodrama exercises.

AN INTEGRATED COURSE

The human services course under evaluation is an elective that is taught each spring semester. The course introduces students to basic acting techniques in order to increase their own self-awareness, while also learning creative avenues for promoting growth and healing in a variety of client populations. Students challenge established patterns by way of acting exercises designed to highlight voice, body, and mind

connections. These acting exercises are integrated into the major counseling theories.

The course objectives and learning outcomes are as follows: 1) Understand and be able to articulate concepts such as the neutral self, give and take, immediacy/awareness, mind/body connection, impulse, freeing the voice, non-verbal, and improvisation, particularly as they relate to counseling therapeutic work; 2) Have an increased understanding of how acting techniques may be integrated into counseling and psychotherapeutic work, as well as in their own self-growth; 3) Experience and reflect on their own personal self-discovery and growth; 4) Demonstrate a beginning level of skill at applying acting-based techniques learned in class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students often indicate that experiential educational methods are some of the most impactful in terms of learning and personal growth (Piercy, et al, 2016). Students have also reported increased levels of their sense of accomplishment, their self-awareness, and an increased understanding of course content, when engaging in experiential learning methods (Rehffuss & Meyer, 2012; Meyer, 2012). Integrating acting, or drama oriented exercises has been shown to increase the well-being of students while providing them a safe place to express thoughts and/or feelings (Dutton, 2017). Spolin (1999) suggested that actor training exercises challenge one's temptations to become overly critical of oneself or others, which is a common dilemma for students. These methods have shown benefits in therapeutic settings with individuals, groups, families, so it is understandable that students would benefit from exposure to them during their Human Services education (Ruby, 2009).

Lomas (2016) reviewed 170 articles discussing the major art forms of music, literature, drama and visual art, focusing on reports of flourishing, well-being and happiness. He discusses the benefits of visual art, music, literature and drama as effective therapeutic tools and identified five positive outcomes: sense making, enriching experience, aesthetic appreciation, entertainment, and bonding, with the intention of bringing to light the positive benefits of these forms of art therapies. Other research has suggested that participating in drama therapy can be cathartic and therapeutic outcomes show signs of increased cognitive functioning, happiness and social contact (Hankir, et.al., 2017).

Recent examinations of drama therapy approaches have shown valuable outcomes. A study by Keisari and Palgi (2017) examined the impacts of life review drama therapy for over 500 older adults. They

found that participants experienced an increase in the core identity, giving the opportunity to explore and discover new perspectives of the self. Participants also experienced an enhanced positive impact of their life stories, a significant reduction in depression symptoms, and an increase in successful aging. While participating in drama therapeutic approaches poses challenges for those managing anxiety related disorders, it provides an effective way to manage stress responses (Versluys, 2017).

Peleg, Lev-Wiese, and Yaniv (2014) examined potential impacts of Holocaust survivors acting out their stories with youth on stage. Survivors participated in the study, giving personal accounts of survival via semi-structured interviews and the accounts were then made into plays and performed. Findings revealed that the shared testimonial of life experiences through drama therapy increased reconstruction of self-identity and potential for rehabilitation of trauma through participating in the drama therapy process. This work expanded on the research conducted by Clark and Davis-Gage (2010) that found benefits in treating trauma in psychodrama groups, leading to empowerment in the trauma surviving participants.

As the research base grows in relation to the use of acting techniques, drama therapy, and psychodrama, it only seems logical that Human Services students have the opportunity to be exposed to these techniques and learn about their potential value. There were no comprehensive studies that examined the impact of these techniques in training Human Services students, so the authors formulated this basic qualitative investigation to establish one small contribution to the conversation.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This article is a summary of three student questionnaires concerning class that was designed to introduce undergraduate Human Services students to acting exercises and psychodrama techniques. The authors of the study were interested in learning 1) how students' understandings of counseling/psychotherapy might have been impacted by the course; 2) how the course exercises might have impacted students' personal self-awareness and/or sense of self; 3) how students imagined themselves applying the techniques learned in class to their own emerging professional work. The qualitative study utilized thematic analysis of students' responses to address the questions.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers utilized a qualitative methodology to address their research questions. Since the research questions were reflective and ex post facto in nature, it seemed logical that open ended survey questions would yield the foundational types of information desired by the researchers. It was determined that a thematic analysis would be useful in examining student responses since the researchers were hoping to identify commonalities and major trends within the students' answers to the questions. The work of Brown and Clark (2006) concerning the use of thematic analysis in psychology guided the research process. Brown's and Clark's approach resonated with the researchers' own post-modernist theoretical orientations. Since the study was qualitative, open-ended, and constructivist in nature, it was logical to utilize an approach that allowed the students' responses to be constructed into central themes.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, the researchers invited students who had enrolled in the class to participate in the study. The course is offered once a year, so the data was gathered over the course of three years, during the spring semester of each academic year.

During the last session of the course, student participants were provided an invitation to participate in the study. Informed Consent documentation was attached to the course syllabus and students were welcome to stay and participate or leave. Once signed Informed Consent forms were secured, students who decided to participate were given the questionnaire to complete by hand. Over the three years being examined, 57 students participated in the survey. Students were asked the three questions for which they supplied anonymous, written responses. The 57 student responses were transcribed by graduate assistants and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for coding and thematic analysis purposes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The goal of meaningful thematic analysis is to extract both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Creswell, 2007). Thematic analysis requires a multi-step process that begins with reading and re-reading the gathered data in order to build familiarity with it. Next, initial codes are established in an effort to categorize similar responses in the data. Following that, codes are clustered into emerging themes. Next, these themes are examined in light of the research questions and the assumptions of the researchers. In this study, this meant that researchers began to see if the benefits and

course objectives were truly revealing themselves in the responses of the students. Once that step is finalized, the researchers formulate a final definition of each theme found in the data. Finally, the researchers review the finalized themes and see which ones contribute to the study and which ones are either surprising or contradictory to the assumptions of the researchers. Surprising or contradictory themes are not removed, but simply noted and discussed in the research findings. In this particular study, the researchers utilized two research assistants in the transcribing, coding, and thematic analysis of the study. These graduate level students had no connection with, nor did they participate in, the undergraduate class being examined. As such, their analyses were useful because they were not influenced by any connection to the students or the class experiences.

RESULTS

For each question, three primary themes were extracted from student responses. Each theme is identified, briefly discussed, and supported by examples of student comments.

Question 1, "How has your understanding of counseling/psychotherapy been influenced by this course?"

Question 1, Theme 1: Student understanding of acting and psychodrama techniques

The Human Services student should acquire an intellectual understanding and an experiential intelligence of the course content in order to develop acumen with these techniques. Multiple written sources are provided to enhance student understanding of techniques utilized in psychodrama, movement, voice, and acting. Theories are discussed and explored through classroom discussions, exercises, and role plays. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 1 to Question 1 is listed below.

"I've learned a lot about the history of psychodrama, specific techniques, and how to blend different techniques from various modalities using a psycho dramatic framework."

"I gained a deeper understanding of how techniques are used."

"Now I have an understanding of the theoretical principles and also firsthand experience, both participating in and facilitating a psychodrama based

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group. I feel a lot more connected to using creativity in therapy, and I see how important it is."

"The incorporation with drama and counseling was great. I feel like I have so many more tools to use if I were to work with families or individuals."

Question 1, Theme 2: Practical application/hands on experience

Course content largely emphasizes practical application. An introduction to the theories and readings required for each class session are presented at the beginning of each unit followed by several days of hands on experience. After each exercise, participating students share their experience. Students are encouraged to discuss feelings, difficulties, discoveries, and to ask questions. The discussion is then opened to non-participating students to share observations. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 2 to Question 1 is listed below.

"Practicing the exercises and techniques and not just reading about them in a textbook helped me to really grasp and experience the essence and benefits of what was being taught."

"...most of the time we were on our feet doing things instead of sitting there talking."

"There was freedom to learn and experiment with the techniques hands-on."

"...gave me lots of hand-on experience and ideas of how it can be playful and bring more intimacy to groups."

"My understanding of counseling and psychotherapy has been elevated...I have been given a space to practice them with respectful supervision and guidance...this unique setting has granted me a much broader perspective and understanding of what my future clients might be going through."

Question 1, Theme 3: Creativity

The course content operationalizes creativity to expand the options for Human Services professionals in client service. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 3 to Question 1 is listed below.

"I actually now have a more positive view of it and I'm looking more forward to this field of counseling since now I know that I can bring the creative side of me."

"Creativity is key."

"My understanding of counseling now is that I can be very creative."

"I am very creative and now I can try different techniques instead of traditional therapy."

Question #2: "How has this course impacted your own personal growth and/or self-awareness?"

Question 2, Theme 1: Voice/Self-expression

An early unit in this course is voice work. Theories from Kristin Linklater's (2006) definitive work, *Freeing the Natural Voice* are discussed. Exercises from this work provide daily content for the voice unit. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 1 to Question 2 is listed below.

"Being more honest with who I am has allowed me to be more open and honest with others because...I am speaking my truth."

"I am working on speaking up and advocating for myself more."

"When working on our voices, I realized how much I hold back and how anxious I am to really share my voice."

"This course has pushed me to see that I have my own unique voice that deserves to be heard."

Question 2, Theme 2: Self-awareness

Course content requires student investment in awareness of self, through mindfulness exercises, role-plays, group experiences, and written reflections. Students identify behaviors, mindsets, and habitual tensions that block them from being and sharing their true selves. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 2 to Question 2 is listed below.

"I look forward to coming to class because I get to discover something new about myself."

"I have a better understanding of myself and the origins of my problems...it has given me areas in my own life to work on in my own therapy."

"I think the area I've most grown in because of this course has been minimizing my over thinking."

"It has allowed me to be more comfortable in my own body and has given me the chance to be myself."

"This course made me understand my fears and made me want to change parts of me that I was not aware of."

"I'd come in every Monday knowing it would help me on my path to discovery/healing."

Question 2, Theme 3: Personal growth

Course content requires students to participate in exercises, reflections, and discussions that pertain to issues the Human Services professional is likely to encounter in providing client services. A student is likely to play the roles of client, counselor, family member, and self throughout the course. These experiences are rich with opportunities for significant personal growth. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 3 to Question 2 is listed below.

"One of those courses you come in everyday, be yourself, and expect to experience growth in unexpected ways."

"Thanks to this course I am growing at many levels and I mean it whole-heartedly."

"I would hardly ever be the person to join an improve or participate in a role-play in front of class. I felt safe and encouraged to step outside of my comfort zone."

"I personally found the classroom exercises and assignments to be impactful to me on a personal level. I have learned new insights and grown since the beginning of this course."

"It gave me the confidence that I can be myself as a complete person in this field which I love. I now feel way more confident about myself as a future counselor and I know myself better."

"...given me sight through a window that had been getting foggy."

Question #3: "How might you apply what you learned in this course to your own professional practices?"

Question 3, Theme 1: Tools for client expression

Students invest in course content that is creative, dynamic and organic. Discussions held after experiential encounters include application of theory and technique to various professional settings. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 1 to Question 3 is listed below.

"I feel that I now have an entire arsenal of tools to use when working with different types of clients."

"...I think a lot of psychodrama techniques help get people out of ruts. It helps them think in a different way."

"And instead of feeling helpless, I might actually have the tools to aid the situation. I feel slightly more prepared for things that might come up in a job setting."

"...group therapy would be a perfect fit with psychodrama, the different exercises not only help the clients participating but also helps the non-participating member who can gain insight to their own problems."

"I think the concepts of playing and unlearning...will impact the quality of interactions and growth."

"...there are always going to be those who have trouble verbalizing...the expression exercises really help bring out what cannot be spoken."

Question 3, Theme 2: Confidence in utilizing techniques

The classroom setting is a lab where students participate in and observe the work of fellow students. The experiential model is designed for students to glean confidence through engagement in the material and practice utilizing it. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 2 to Question 3 is listed below.

"...and I love that I've given myself permission to try new things out and bend/come up with new techniques."

"I think I can use what I learned in this course in my own professional practice because it helped me learn what I am comfortable doing...It really helped me to be creative with exercises and try not to hold back."

"I am confident that I can lead a group, or at least know a handful of techniques and skills that can help me be successful in counseling..."

"The course definitely made me more comfortable with trying new things at my own practice. It has also given me more confidence to be who I want to be and I appreciate that very much."

Question 3, Theme 3: Self-care

Successful completion of course content requires students to be fully present, willing and able to share their thoughts and feelings in each class session. It is important that students make the useful connection between client care and the necessity of self-care. While the theme of self-care was not an intended outcome of the course, nor the research study, it was a clearly emerging theme that students communicated and all those involved in the analysis of the data identified. A sample of student responses revealing Theme 3 to Question 3 is listed below.

"If I am aware of who I am I can help others."

"Being aware that I need to evaluate, to have "me" time, and know my boundaries will help me be genuine and honest with clients."

"This course helped me understand my own feelings as

well as helped me understand my transferences toward others.”

“I will definitely use the breathing techniques as well as many others I have learned in my professional career. I feel more equipped in the way I counsel people and I feel more confident in myself.”

“I have also learned how to handle myself, which will help prevent burn-out as a professional.”

LIMITATIONS

The present study was preliminary and reflective in nature. It was bound to one setting and 57 students who completed one particular academic classroom experience. Though over a time span of three different years, the dataset gathered is still relatively small. The students who responded to the questions also come from one large state university. As such, the findings of the study cannot necessarily be applied to a wide array of settings.

Additionally, being a qualitative study of this nature, no potential confounding variables were controlled for and one cannot assume that student experiences were only influenced by the course under investigation. That being said, it is reasonable to assume that students would have the capacity to connect their classroom experiences with potential outcomes, which it appears they did in the data analysis.

Finally, as is the case with much qualitative research, the primary investigators are also the instructors of the course and are subject to potential observation biases. It is logical that when one designs a course, s/he would likely want it to yield positive outcomes. To address this potential bias, two graduate assistants from outside of the Human Services department were asked to participate in the transcription, coding, and analysis of the data. Each data analyst worked in isolation and only came together to identify common themes after their initial individual analysis was complete.

CONCLUSION

Student responses were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting a need for more empirical investigation of the clinical and personal impact of course content and experiences. The thematic findings inform the potential variables to be investigated in a more quantitatively oriented study since each theme, while grounded in student responses, has not been

operationalized to connect with larger learning outcomes or established Human Services theory or practice.

Findings also suggest that codification of the course content and this unique approach is needed. The co-instructors of this course each have expertise in one of the two fields that are integrated, Human Services and Acting. The language used in the field of Acting should be identified, defined, and translated to the field of Human services so that Human Services professionals who teach this course, can clearly understand and effectively communicate this impactful course content. Operationalizing this language will provide clarification and enable the development of more measurable outcomes. The authors are presently considering developing a course text, as well as workshops or other training opportunities outside of the university setting.

This might be useful beyond the classroom, too. Baker, Metcalf, Varker, and O'Donnell (2017) conducted a large-scale review of studies evaluating the efficacy of creative therapies in their treatment of clients diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They found that the quality of the trials conducted was very low, thus, the clinical impact of the therapies was unable to be determined. The authors recommended that clinical trials utilizing greater scientific rigor are needed. That is the only way the effectiveness of creative, arts based, treatments may be fully established. As such, further scientific investigation is needed for both treatment and educational outcomes.

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