Navigating the praxis of case discussion groups: a critical perspective on experiential learning in counselling training

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Abstract

This opinion piece discusses some challenges I have found when facilitating MSc (the University of Greenwich) case discussion groups (CDGs), where experiential learning is the predominant learning theory employed, in order to help foster self-awareness in tandem with developing skills. I, however, posit that such learning may lead to cognitive overload for students and hamper their development as trainee counsellors, when they are simultaneously processing complex emotional experiences, various theoretical frameworks and their own developing identities as counsellors. Inspired by the praxis model within pedagogy and intent on improving student learning, I investigated how best to use critical reflection, dialogue and tempo to mitigate potential cognitive and emotional overload.

Keywords: case discussion group, experiential learning, praxis pedagogy, counselling training, cognitive overload

Introduction

As a practising counsellor and an educator for ten years, I have been committed to the transformative power of experiential learning (Kolb, 1983), particularly within the counsellor-training context. However, my more recent experience as a university lecturer, facilitating case discussion groups (CDGs) with novice trainees on a master's course, left me wondering about the nuances of this group learning process. I was struck by the difficulties voiced by these students, particularly their struggles in experiencing their feelings and observing their thought patterns whilst needing to theoretically analyse. Through this piece I will aim to condense my explorations of utilising the framework of praxis pedagogy to critically examine some of the assumptions underpinning experiential learning and how I have aimed to address these challenges.

First, I must situate the reader in the specific niche of counselling training: 1) the practical experience level of trainees is not necessarily correlated to the 'academic level' of the course; students may be on a master's course and academically proficient, but they are still novices in the practice of counselling; 2) counselling training requires trainees to evolve interlinked personal and professional domains (Haber, 1990), demanding that they explore their personal, social and cultural history and reflect on how this may affect their ability to counsel others (Murphy and Schofield, 2024). The student is thus both the subject and tool (BACP, 2021).

The pedagogical application of CDGs

The educational tool of CDG, when viewed from within this niche, has an integral role. Individual students first introduce a clinical case to a group of peers, telling the group a little about the client and how, in their opinion, their relationship and the work has been developing and what has been evoked in them emotionally; they also provide the group with a transcript of part of a counselling session with the respective client and the members of the group offer their own thoughts upon this. It is within this context that the students' counselling practice is described, explained, theorised and re-imagined (Arnold and Mundy, 2020). I see my role here as applying both my own educational knowledge and skills as a therapist to help and guide students towards a fuller understanding both of the client and themselves, to the point of reflecting-on-action, within the context of the counselling relationship, so as to enable them to articulate their own position and inquire into their client work, which enables the development of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983).

Now, to return to the more general pedagogical sphere, though the described process may at face value seem rather innocuous, students are expected to reflect critically on their responses to clients, interpret complex narratives, develop new interventions and collaborate meaningfully with peers and use this information to effect professional action and change (Freire, 1970). However, if we draw our attention back to my previous observation on the niche of this field, Freire's professional action is not a solid professional self; rather it is a deeply personal self. An inexorable link with an existential question is at stake, thus this learning often occurs under conditions of emotional vulnerability. Novice trainees frequently encounter internal tension as their emerging 'self' is exposed to scrutiny within peer discussions, prompting defensiveness or strong anxiety. This presents challenges: to me, a pedagogical one, as a student's intense defensive anxiety takes time to be examined and responded to effectively; to the students, having to contend with these emotional demands.

I consequently turned to the praxis pedagogy framework. This engages the pedagogist to immerse themselves in deep and rigorous explorations and critiques of practice experiences and ethics in relation to how theory or skill is enacted, embodied or realised, while at all times maintaining an orientation to student need (Arnold *et al*., 2012). Thus, I revisited Kolb's (1983) theory of experiential learning, which for me best embodies the methodology that underpins the CDG pedagogy. This details four modes of learning that are particularly relevant to counselling training. For students to become qualified counsellors, they need to be able to **involve** themselves fully, openly and (as far as is possible) without biases in their new experiences. This enables them to **observe** their cognitive, psychological, relational and somatic experiences and then **reflect** on their experiences from different counselling perspectives. In this way they **create** new concepts, by integrating their observations and reflections into sound counselling theories, and finally, they are able to use these conceptualisations to make decisions in their counselling practice. Though valuable in many ways, this can be seen as a 'minimal guidance technique' (Kirschner *et al*., p.2006), which involves such student skills such 'discovery learning', 'problem posing learning' and 'inquiry learning', which, for novice students, may be less effective educational strategies. These 'unguided' learning techniques force learners to focus not only on *what* is being discussed but also on *how* they experience this learning (*ibid*., p.2006). From a neurological perspective, when learning tasks require too much capacity or process multiple streams of information

concurrently and quickly, the learning is hampered, to the impairment of memory formation (de Jong, 2009). In other words, the student experiences 'cognitive (over)load' (Sweller, 1994).

I am far from the first to find such challenges. Dryden (1977) observed that in seminars such as CDG, sometimes both the trainer and trainees can go too fast for the presenting student, which may make the student defensive, reducing engagement and limiting learning. Evans (2011) echoes Dryden's (1977) suggestion that the timing of the remarks made to the presenter and the pacing of the session are important variables to bear in mind and be balanced out. So, it seems my students' sense of being overwhelmed was due, at least in part, to the pace of learning required, when multiple information streams were being thrown at the presenting student and needing to be processed on both a cognitive and emotional level. In other words, using Sweller's (1994) theory, students experience both intrinsic and germane load as they are given too much new information at once; if they struggle to make sense of it, their anxiety increases and their ability to apply knowledge is diminished.

Keeping in mind these problematic matters of cognitive overload and of timing (both pace and delivery), how could the experiential learning methods be modified, the better to take into account students' – and particularly novice students' – learning pace?

In his popular book, Daniel Kahneman (2011) describes two learning cycles/selves: fast-thinking and slow-thinking. Fast thinking is about sensing and acting in the moment without the intervening of any cognitive interpretation – for example, our most basic psychological processes and defences – whereas slow thinking is based on recalled memory of the concrete experiences that have been given meaning through cognitive interpretation, such as how a theory may apply to a client. Within this model, it has been suggested that these two streams do not operate independently; rather, that they have a tendency for impedance (Kolb and Kolb, 2017).

'Impedance' struck me as our fulcrum. Inspired by this, I have been intentional in limiting the amount of feedback given in one session, so that students have less information to process and more time between feedback statements. Relatedly, my role is also to manage the sequentiality of inputs that borders on reflexive critique, in order to reduce the amount of feedback that is rapidly delivered and so harder to integrate, thereby enabling reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). By this means, the fast-thinking process in students does not 'block' the slow thinking and may therefore help to counter what both Dryden (1977) and Evans (2011) observed when the pace was too fast. In concurrence, when there is a rapid exchange of ideas, facilitating some space before the next 'phase' of inputs may allow the slow-thinking self to grasp the contextual terrain more fully than when there is a rapid change of context. Both aspects enable more effective learning.

Conclusion

Though a definite outcome may not have been obvious, I have noticed that these steps have produced a positive shift in students' engagement and their capacity to tolerate the experience of CDG, together with greater reflexivity in practice. This may point to a development of sustainability in reflexive thinking, emotional processing and action – vital to a counsellor, whose key responsibility is constantly to learn from and respond to new situations and experiences as neutrally and empathically as possible.

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