

Errata:

Teaching Person-Centered Counseling Using a Co-Counseling Experience

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Following is Dr. Hess' full article, which includes material inadvertently deleted from the original publication. We apologize both to the reader and to Dr. Hess.

Abstract. *Rogarian attributes of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding are at the core of person-centered counseling. The author presents a training model for undergraduates based on these seminal ideals. Included are how to create an emotionally safe environment for acquiring clinical skills, the importance of developing in-class community, how to facilitate choosing co-counselors, and the impact of supervision and feedback. The use of didactic exercises, required papers and reading, co-counseling triads, discussions, relevant self-disclosure, and high student and instructor engagement promotes an interactive, inclusive, clinically challenging course. Teachers and students report high satisfaction with this classroom experience.*

Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy provides a solid theoretical and practical foundation for beginning students in counseling. Rogers believed that creating a "growth-promoting climate" rests on three primary counselor attributes: congruence (e.g. genuineness, honesty, and realness), unconditional positive regard (e.g. acceptance, caring, and respect), and accurate empathic understanding (e.g. attending, listening, and paraphrasing) (Rogers, 1983). The core of the course for undergraduate psychology majors discussed in this paper revolves around these seminal humanistic ideals.

Over the past 25 years, I have taught hundreds of graduate and undergraduate students both beginning and advanced counseling skills. Several components have been consistently reliable in creating, maintaining, and encouraging a productive and successful experiential preparation for entree into the counseling profession. They include

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creating a safe learning community that will foster personal sharing, supporting appropriate risk-taking, engaging in important in-class exercises that develop empathy and trust, experiencing outside-of-class co-counseling, relevant self-disclosure by the teacher (professional and personal), role-playing in classroom fishbowls, and lastly, ending therapeutic relationships well.

This academically, personally, and clinically challenging learning environment exposes new clinical hopefuls to the near-real-life experience that a co-counseling model can provide. Some of the rewards of facilitating such a class have been the excitement of group learning, the in-class intimacy, risk-taking, creativity, genuine caring, deep learning, great warmth and humor, and the impressiveness of the wealth of talent in the room.

Although the class is usually filled with psychology majors, students from many majors have benefited from this course. The class is limited to 24 participants to allow for an even number of triad groups. On several occasions, the number was not conducive to an even number of groupings, which has necessitated one dyad or a quartet.

The following is a description of how to teach an Introduction to Counseling course to undergraduates using a person-centered, co-counseling model. It will outline the individual aspects of course pedagogy and praxis, integral to teaching a Rogerian-based co-counseling learning experience. Students (and teachers) have reported tremendous personal benefit from the experiential learning of this class. In this growth-promoting climate, the class becomes the laboratory for developing genuineness, acceptance, caring, compassion, and empathic understanding. Throughout this paper, the importance of these humanistic tenets and person-centered co-counseling practices will be demonstrated as a viable and effective model for teaching beginning counselors.

Creating a Container

Sonoma State students look forward to taking Introduction to Counseling. For decades it has had a reputation as an important class. A screening interview is used to inform the student of the class

workload (reading and writing assignments and eight weeks of taped, outside-class, co-counseling sessions), as well as the responsibilities of confidentiality and descriptions of the in-class role-plays and exercises. In addition, this interview screens out students who are inappropriate for the class because they lack prerequisites, have ongoing stressors and are in need of professional counseling, have work schedules that do not accommodate co-counseling times, or have other concerns that would compromise their learning or the learning group overall. The excitement of a hands-on learning experience with a like-minded community ignites the commitment of the group before the class begins. Strong ground rules explained in the syllabus aid in the development of security and safety students need to engage in a self-revealing learning environment.

It has been my experience that person-centered counseling taught in a student-centered classroom contributes to significant personal and clinical learning. I echo Rogers (1983) when he said, "The significant learnings are the more personal ones--independence, self-initiated and responsible learning, release of creativity, a tendency to become more of a person" (p.129). Students often report how the class has changed their lives and helped deepen them as people. One student commented, "Knowing my co-counselor trusted me with her deepest pain changed me. I felt like I had something to offer her that mattered to her. It was an awesome experience and one that I want more of."

Clear boundaries are vital to building trust in the classroom. A safe environment is established through stressing confidentiality, personal and professional disclosure, storytelling, introductory exercises, and teacher transparency.

On the first day of class, the syllabus is explained as a contract, and those who return after the first 10-minute class break agree to the conditions of the course. Maintaining confidentiality is a major aspect of the success of this learning experience. Any violation of confidence of the co-counseling triads or of personal sharing done during group work results in being dropped from the class. In more than 20 years of teaching this course, I have asked three students to leave because of a breach in confidentiality.

My teaching style is interactive, and I use personal and professional disclosure to help create an environment of honest discovery within a nonjudgmental atmosphere. As a clinician for 25 years, I have treatment stories of every ilk. I have experienced the successes and the less-than-noble moments that come with honest, contactful interaction. Using my experience to help identify and reduce the fears that come up in this class is one way to begin initiating trust.

A good deal of energy is expended at the beginning to help students develop belief and confidence in themselves and each other. As Parker Palmer (1998) says,

I should have remembered from my own experience that students, too, are afraid: afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their friends. When my students' fears mix with mine, fear multiplies geometrically – and education is paralyzed. (p. 37)

Storytelling; congruent, in-the-moment check-ins; and humorous anecdotes from my own professional development have been effective in breaking the ice and helping to normalize fear and to avoid educational or personal paralysis.

Authentic transparency of the teacher as well as his or her availability during office hours, via e-mail, over the phone, and in the 30-minute supervision sessions with each co-counseling triad are important additional components. For a solid clinical learning community that supports and encourages self-disclosure and trust to emerge or develop, it is important for the teacher to be a role model who takes the risks she or he is asking the students to take.

Developing Community

Developing a clinical learning community is the beginning phase of the course and is the crucial foundation for the entire classroom experience. Around-the-circle check-ins, in which students

share what is currently relevant to them, bring a sense of connection from the onset of the first class. Icebreaker exercises, questions often asked by beginning counselors, issues of diversity and countertransference, and humorous anecdotes from my own clinical experience pepper the facilitated discussion of the first few classes.

The importance of warmth and humor cannot be underplayed. As Thomas Kulman mentions in *Humor and Psychotherapy* (1994), there are several beneficial psychological consequences of laughter and humor evident in studies of educational processes. Kulman has noted that studies have shown humor aids in acquisition of new information, maximization of attention, stimulation of imaginative play, and positive correlations to measures of intelligence and empathy, as well as varied measures of creative behavior. Rogers and many others endorsed humor as a cardinal trait of the fully functional human (Hickson, 1977). Humor fosters intimacy and intra/interpersonal confidence and helps the medicine of feedback and self-disclosure go down in a way that feels uplifting and inclusive.

Building community is intertwined with laying the groundwork for students' choosing their co-counselors and beginning dyads. Didactic exercises, theoretical lectures and small- and large-group discussions prepare students for becoming co-counselors. Several handouts, given during the first three weeks, examine individual behavior in groups, including when one self-discloses and how much. For example, I have used Egan's *The Skill of Self Disclosure* (1976) for years because of his direct, humanistic, and clear-cut orientation. Although more than three decades old, Egan's material remains relevant and helpful to students in group training.

Reading, writing inventories, and interpersonal in-class exercises introduce students to accurate empathy, transference awareness, confrontation, attending, aspirational and mandated ethics, listening, transparency, authenticity, compassion, and paraphrasing. Having read and practiced these skills, students are better prepared to use them in their triads. As students practice listening, attending, paraphrasing, and empathic attunement, they develop a sense of mutual respect as the group members begin to understand that they are in a shared situation. Everyone practices on each other, and each values

doing a good job. At this point of skill development, students choose each other as co-counselors.

Choosing Co-Counseling Triads

For eight weeks, students meet weekly outside of class as co-counselors with an observer and practice what they are learning in class while being audio recorded. The co-counseling experience is the fundamental aspect of the success of the course. Students put considerable attention into the triads. How the co-counselors navigate the frustrations of learning beginning counseling skills while simultaneously developing a therapeutic relationship contributes to the depth and scope of the learning in this course.

The day of choosing partners usually produces a great deal of excitement and tension. Before choosing, students have prepared their autobiographies. These are written, two-page, bullet-point outlines of their major life experiences, their personal strengths and weaknesses, and the hours they are available for counseling. These papers are shared in silence until each group member has read them all. There is a noticeable energy shift after this exchange. It is as Maureen O'Hara (2003) says, "Through intimate meetings with people struggling to find their way, we encounter the seemingly boundless capacity for learning and healing even of those who have lived through unspeakable horror" (p. 67). Learning about classmates beyond the initial exterior deepens class members' level of intimacy. Upon checking in after the readings, students often are moved to tears, feel speechless, or say they feel overwhelmed or privileged to have been entrusted with the glimpses of their peer's life. Many wish they had been more courageous in their own sharing, and several have openly committed to the group to take risks more often as the class continues.

Check-ins precede the choosing process. During this time, feelings of inferiority typically emerge for students (i.e. memories of not being chosen on the play yard for sports or for other social membership). Personal experience has shown that outwardly addressing the trepidation of the group and linking it to how clients often feel when they begin (or deliberate about beginning) treatment aids in normalizing group anxiety.

Over the years I have tried varied methods of dividing the class into co-counseling triads. Random assignment, teacher assignment, and computer-generated assignments have all been employed to create the three-person learning groups; none has been as effective as student selection.

I explain ground rules for choosing the triad and give a brief lecture supporting honest exploration when selecting persons for the co-counseling experience. Encouragement is given to find those who feel like a “good fit,” to avoid joining up with friends or grouping out of fear they won’t be chosen, to say “no” when it does not feel right, to trust themselves and take a risk to pursue the people they want, and to not be attached to the outcome. Instructions also include the suggestion that if there is a specific class member with whom they are interested in working, they need to approach that person first.

Students stand in the center of the room while interviewing each other and clustering into co-counseling triads. To signal that they are grouped and unavailable, the students sit together and begin to schedule their first co-counseling appointment. The primary purpose of the initial negotiation is to determine who will be whose counselor. After that decision is made, each student will maintain the same role for the entire eight weeks. I then instruct students to think of the triad as a professional training ground. They are asked to avoid fraternizing outside of class and to complete in-class exercises with students not in their own triad in order to protect the integrity of the co-counseling container.

A debriefing exercise to release the remaining tension from the choosing process is done. One of my favorites is for each person to stand in a circle shoulder to shoulder, then taking a half turn to the right, the person behind gives the person in front of them a shoulder rub. After one or two minutes, instructions are given to turn around and return the favor. Amid the sighs and giggles of relief, brief statements are made out loud regarding the current subjective experience of the class members. I often hear, “I’m glad that’s over,” “That was harder (or easier) than I thought,” “I didn’t like that,” or “I was surprised that people wanted me to be with them.” After a 15-minute break, students check in, each person taking time to more fully share the experience of choosing and being chosen.

At this time I explain the triad ground rules (see appendix) and answer questions, such as: “What if I am tired, should I still try to see my client?” (Yes, see your client and examine self-care and other personal issues that might arise as a result of the role.); “If I feel like my counselor is not understanding me, can I tell him?” (Experiment with taking risks to state your perceptions and experience and see what happens.). I offer the students genuine reassurance and support and remind them of my availability for consultation if need be.

Developing Counseling Skills

In addition to the outside co-counseling experience, in class students review theories and watch clinical training videos of “master” therapists, such as Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Albert Ellis, James Bugental, Virginia Satir, and others. Many theoretical orientations of counseling and therapy are explored, discussed, and practiced in small groups or in a written format.

To answer students’ individual and personal questions as well as to monitor their progress in overall learning, I require frequent, brief integration papers. Integration papers are short academic explorations of the course material and in-class experiences punctuated with the students’ personal insights and awareness. In a great integration paper, the student discusses the significant learning from class and the triad and elaborates the discourse with lessons from his or her own personal life.

The themes that emerge in the group through the papers then become the topic of the weekly lectures on practice. These papers also provide an opportunity for teacher and student to connect more personally and allow the teacher to address individual challenges noted in the classroom or in the writing assignments. The co-counseling experience stimulates thoughts and feelings for everyone, and these informal papers provide an arena for students to more fully explore the issues that are relevant to them.

I model open, honest relationship with my students through the integration papers, supervision, in-class lectures, and exercises. The modeling of congruence is essential to the training of effective counselors. Through the process of student reflection and the teacher’s

candid feedback, each becomes more known to the other. This honest interaction, what Sherry Kessler (1991) calls the “teaching presence,” can facilitate an experience similar to the working alliance found in counseling. When the teacher can appropriately share vulnerability and is “willing to feel deeply, to be moved or stirred by what a student expresses or by what comes up for the teacher in the presence of these students or the themes being raised” (Kessler, 1991, p. 10), trust and intimacy develop. Relationship is fundamental to all good counseling (Kottler, 2004).

In-class exercises reflect the content under examination and bring the material alive while deepening student relationships. A combination of humorous and playful assignments combined with more serious investigation into oneself and one’s family seems to work well. For example, when studying the psychoanalytic theory, the class is divided into groups of four and each person characterizes himself or herself as a color, an event, a flower, a food, and a car. Using the same categories, they then describe each other. After listening to how the others perceived them, they share what they assigned as representative of themselves. The students are instructed to share with each other the rationale for the choices made for himself or herself and for each other and to discuss the similarities and differences. During the large-group discussion afterward, students typically guess the exercise as an example of perspective and how the unconscious works. By highlighting the discrepancy between how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others, the class becomes aware of previously unknown parts of themselves. The idea that one is perceived as a red Porsche while self-identified as a station wagon allows new possibilities of self-perception to emerge and become conscious.

An important in-class exercise is co-counseling using a fishbowl format. The fishbowl experiences inspire, encourage, and support the students to take academic and clinical risks, to test individual counseling responses, and to receive feedback regarding effectiveness from their peers. I usually do the first counseling demonstration with a student volunteer as the client, following up with my own self-critique of the 15-minute example session. I then ask two students to volunteer, one as the counselor and the other as the client. The client is asked to bring up a current concern to which the counselor will give 15 minutes’

attention. The rest of the class and the instructor sit in a circle and act as a group observer for the dyad, giving feedback to the counselor as to his or her effectiveness. After the self-critique, we ask the student counselor if she or he wants peer feedback, and if so, the class then tells him or her what they saw and what questions they had. Peer feedback from the group or the individual observer in the triad helps the student counselors stay current with their learning and helps denote the areas where improvement is needed.

As the clinical focus is person-centered, most of the skills focus on genuineness, caring, and empathic understanding using attending, listening, and paraphrasing. The deeper component of the course involves how the student's intrapersonal discovery and insight interfaces with the class as a learning community and then expands out to the world as a whole. O'Hara (2003) captures it by saying,

When individuals find that their own personal and authentic expression provides some unique and vital element in the life of the group, and where there is coherence between their inner world and the community in which they live, they experience a deep sense of fulfillment and joy. (p. 73)

Students often mention the happiness that accompanies personal growth while learning to serve others. There are many comments on trying new ways to communicate with roommates, family, and friends and having success with their attempts. Group members often write about and share in their check-ins how much their co-counseling experience facilitated their learning the concepts experientially and how happy they were to have had the experience with their triad members and the class at large. It is my belief that learning counseling skills is best facilitated by practice and feedback. This feedback, along with supervision, is imperative for the beginning counselor to reflect and learn from the weekly sessions.

Providing Supervision

Five forms of clinical supervision are provided in this course: (1) the triad observer offers peer supervision, (2) the teacher provides professional supervision during the required half-hour session with each triad, (3) the class breaks into small supervision groups (not with their triad members), in which students share what they are learning in the counselor role, what they are finding most challenging, and what questions they have about counseling, and (4) the use of the audio recordings for adjunctive supervision with the instructor and for writing the final co-counseling paper. I direct students at the beginning of the semester that the counseling sessions may only occur with a recording device present. In circumstances where there is a discrepancy of memory, these tapes can be invaluable.

Finally, peer feedback in the fishbowl exercise is the fifth modality used to provide supervision. Peer feedback also facilitates an interactive, interpersonal learning experience. Self-empowerment, confidence building, improved competency, and enhanced commitment to the co-counseling process are positive results of supportive, student-centered, honest feedback from the teacher and the observer in the triad. Trust is deepened by students' attempts to understand and help each other learn and by increasing risks in self-disclosure during the fishbowl feedback, teacher supervision, and in-class supervision groups.

The exploration of meaningful feedback consists of four components: (1) curiosity and exploration of counseling responses, (2) internal dialogues that are disruptive to the counseling relationships, (3) fears of failure and success, and (4) questions about technique and process. For example, one male student was unaware that while responding to a peer in a fishbowl role-play, he kept addressing the client as "Buddy." "OK Buddy, what's going on with you?" and "Well Buddy, your girlfriend doesn't seem to like what you are doing." One student watching the interchange was angry and frustrated with her classmate because his language felt disrespectful and "one-up" to her. The client echoed some of this feeling as well. The counselor student asked the rest of the class for our perceptions. With honest feedback, deep awareness broke through for the counselor, who was then willing

to speak about his fears of being “too soft” if he outwardly showed empathy. His dad had called him a “sissy” if he ever cried or was tender toward his parents or siblings. The influence of the past on the present was profound to observe, and everyone learned something that day.

By midterm, student relations are strong, the level of intimacy in the triads is noticeable, and there is a high level of risk-taking and candid disclosure among the group. In-class check-ins and exercises, supervision groups, and fishbowls support safety and trust among the members and with the teacher. Feeling encouraged and confident, students are more congruent, compassionate, immediate and patient with one another in their observing and counseling. They are “lifted beyond their own personal best” (O’Hara, 2003, p. 66) through their co-counseling experience individually and the class overall.

Experiencing Closure

The last crucial component in the course is the group closure exercise. We devote the last two classes to each student’s taking center stage and being recognized by their classmates and instructor. One at a time, each student receives positive feedback regarding aspects of himself or herself that their peers have noted and appreciated. While receiving feedback, the student is instructed not to speak and to only say “thank you” at the end. Students report enjoying the experience of both giving and receiving acknowledgment, and many are moved by the comments of their peers. The exercise is an upbeat ending to the class each semester, and students feel touched and appreciated.

Conclusion

Challenging students to grow and learn through exercises, written assignments, classroom fishbowls, and co-counseling experience is a rewarding pedagogical pursuit. Creating a classroom container by building trust and establishing clear boundaries helps develop community and provide a strong foundation for a meaningful, interactive learning experience. The co-counseling sessions, along with various modes of supervision and support, provide students with an

immediate opportunity to practice congruence, authenticity, and genuine positive regard with other like-minded individuals.

By the end of the course, students have a strong sense about whether the field of counseling is something they wish to pursue further with advanced education or training. They also have a direct experience of the beginning skills of attending, listening, paraphrasing, and authentic self-disclosure. Person-centered counseling taught in a growth-promoting climate stimulates the students' release of creativity and genuine caring about others. In addition, it facilitates students' taking interpersonal risks and helps develop trust and mutual respect. All of this promotes psychological and academic growth, encouraging students to develop further those attributes learned in class and supporting emerging humanistic counselors.

Training students in this interactive and dynamic way makes for a rich teaching experience. As an instructor, I have appreciated the teachers my students become as they deepen and are more visible through this joined learning opportunity. Blending study and practice becomes a foundational influence for continued success in all aspects of our students' lives.

Lastly, I hope what students learn in my classroom supports them to be the best parents, teachers, politicians, doctors, persons, lawyers, therapists, and global participants in an ever-changing world that they can possibly be. It is my belief that a rigorous, grounded, holistic education can impact people to pursue and actualize their greatest potential. Fundamentally, it is to that end that I do what I do, in and out of the classroom.

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Appendix: Co-Counseling Triad Ground Rules

1. Do not do all three weekly sessions back-to-back.
2. All co-counseling sessions are to be kept confidential.
3. Every session is to be audio-recorded. Please check that you have batteries and tape before your client arrives. If you have no recorder you must reschedule your session.
4. All audio recording is to be treated as an extension of your sessions. Make sure the tapes are identified in a way to keep the client's identity anonymous, and keep the tapes in a safe place to assure confidentiality at all times.
5. The students are to keep the same roles with the same persons throughout the entire semester, i.e.; you are always the same person's counselor, the same person's client, and observer.
6. To develop continuity, make all efforts to meet at the same time, the same day of the week, in the same place on campus. Do not meet at people's homes, outdoors, in a public place, or a place that might be interrupted. The library has rooms you can reserve weekly that work well for your sessions. Make reservations in advance and bring a timepiece.
7. Counseling sessions are fifty minutes long.
8. If one person of the triad cannot meet, the session must be cancelled and rescheduled.
9. No socializing or small talk outside of co-counseling sessions, or class, during the eight weeks of co-counseling. Email is to be used to reschedule an appointment only. Any communication outside of your sessions must include all members of the triad. Keep your therapeutic container as solid as you can.
10. Avoid collusion; do not break rules in an effort to be friendly.
11. Don't sit next to triad members or participate with them in classroom exercises.
12. Taking notes after each session in every role will make writing your co-counseling paper easier.
13. The observer is there for the counselor; avoid making comments on the client's process or content.
14. The counselor has the right to solicit or refuse feedback from the observer. The client remains in the room during the feedback, but does not participate in giving it.
15. As the observer focus on the counselor and the verbal and non-verbal interplay between the counselor and the client. Try to be out of the direct line of sight of the other two triad members. You are not to be a distraction to the co-counseling.
16. You can always talk about your triad goings-on with your counselor. No matter what role you need to address, the triad is a good place to process your experience of any of the roles.

17. Remember this is a learning experience. There is no expectation that you “should know” what to do. Everyone is in the same boat. You are all practicing on one another. Treat each other the way you’d like to be treated and you are half way there.

18. No fancy footwork. There is a fine line between taking risks and breaking out of counseling form. I expect you will practice listening, attending, paraphrasing, and begin to develop accurate empathy. You will not be trained to do counseling at the end of this semester, but you will have a “taste” of the counseling experience.

19. I am available to you for any reason. Do not hesitate to see me personally, or with your triad if problems or questions arise. There is no need to suffer silently. The teaching assistant and myself are here to help in any way we can.