

Education Practice Perspectives

Teaching Students to Become Self-reflective Practitioners

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Abstract

Teaching Therapeutic Recreation facilitation techniques involve more than teaching students to develop, implement, and evaluate programs. Students usually become proficient in these aspects of programming, but do not gain the competence and confidence to run these programs as therapeutic groups, which requires the ability to process before, during, and following the group. Students need to become aware of potential issues around parallel processing when running groups. This education-based case report summarizes the restructuring and content of a facilitation techniques course. Objectives were added to have students increase competency in self-reflective practice and gain experience in processing. These objectives are achieved through facilitation presentations, role play, and a self-reflection paper in the form of a life story. Course evaluations suggest that this combination of course requirements has helped to develop habits that will encourage self-reflective practice.

KEYWORDS: Facilitation, life story, parallel processing, role play, self-reflective, therapeutic recreation

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Therapeutic Recreation (TR) education programs are responsible for teaching students to develop, implement, process and evaluate TR programs. Research conducted at the University of Waterloo (UW) to examine the adequacy of such training indicated that a gap existed in their curriculum (Hornibrook, Pedlar & Haasen, 2001; Pedlar, 1995; Sullivan, Pedlar, & Miller, 2002; Wiersma, 2003). Given the emergence of self-reflective practice as an important part of being a TR professional (Miller & Pedlar, 2006), the decision was made to design a course that would include extensive processing, observation, role-play, and self-reflection to complement the theory and practice traditionally taught in TR facilitation techniques courses. Smith (2006) has stated "that to both comprehend and learn something new, we and our students need to put this into the context of what we already know" (p. 19). A TR student can learn facts, theories, models, but another critical area in which to gain knowledge pertains to knowledge of the self. In order to "know yourself", self-reflection must be built into daily practice, focusing on one's impact on, and reaction to, clients in therapeutic groups. This is especially relevant to TR practice because interventions occur within the context of recreation and leisure, which tend to facilitate more informal relationships, resulting in more difficulty distancing oneself from the clients. On the other hand, this is seen as a strength of the profession; the ability to know clients in a leisure context. Self-reflection requires the ability to study oneself through an objective lens. In addition, students need to learn to be aware of potential personal triggers that can often result in parallel processing. Smith, Simmons, and James (as cited in *The Sanctuary Model*, 2009) suggest that "when two or more systems, whether these consist of individuals, groups, or organizations, have significant relationships with one another,

they tend to develop similar affects, cognition, and behaviors, which are defined as parallel processes" (p. 1). Those students and practitioners with similar experiences to their clients are at the greatest risk of parallel processing, which can lead to stress and burnout.

Schön (1983) suggests that society "looks to professionals for the definition and solution of our problems, and it is through them that we strive for social progress" (p.3-4). With their expertise and knowledge, professionals are granted certain rights and privileges that result in a great responsibility toward clients. The purpose of this paper is to discuss self-reflective practice in relation to therapeutic recreation and how it is taught in a Facilitation Techniques course. The structure of the facilitation techniques course is described, including the use of role-play and life stories.

Self-reflective Practice

Self-reflective practice has become important to health professions because of the power that professionals hold as "experts" when interacting with people who they are in a position to help. It has been suggested by Jarvis that reflection goes beyond being a thoughtful practitioner to involvement in an actual learning experience (as cited in Bulman, 2004). Self-reflective practice emerged in the 1980's when pioneers such as Donald Schön (1987) proclaimed that "professional schools of the modern research university are premised on technical rationality...practical competence becomes professional when its instrumental problem solving is grounded in systematic, preferably scientific knowledge, or applied science" (p.8). Schön challenged professionals to go beyond applied science to problem solve in the moment; in our daily routines outcomes are not always as expected because we are interacting with people who are predictably unpredictable.

We cannot always solve problems scientifically particularly where human interactions are involved. Schön also suggests that we need to reflect *on* action whereby we stop and think about what has just happened in the moment. We as professionals need to consider how *we* have contributed to that moment. By thinking about what *we* are doing in time to make a change to the situation at hand, we are reflecting-*in*-action. TR uses words like mindfulness, consciousness and “being in-the-moment” with a patient/client; these are humanistic and not scientific concepts. However, being aware of what is happening in the moment is not enough; we need to reflect on it, construct it, frame it within a context, process it, and make decisions about it.

In addition to reflecting-in-action as to how the professional has contributed to that moment during the experience, self-reflective practice also incorporates the conscious paying attention to personal reactions triggered during a session, enabling the awareness of parallel process between the client and the professional. (J. Griffin, personal communication, Nov. 24, 2009)

Miller and Pedlar (2006) state that “reflective practice recognizes that there simply is no one-size-fits-all solution, especially in those disciplines where we are constantly dealing with the unknown, the uncertain, and the unstable...reflective practice links thought and action with reflection” (p.35).

Janet Griffin, a Recreation Therapist at a mental health hospital, uses reflection and processing with her patients who have experienced post traumatic stress disorder. She encouraged UW to expand the reflection piece in the new course based on her personal experiences in practice and was involved in the development of the course.

As a guest speaker, she cautions students that self-reflective practice will help when practitioners invariably are triggered by a patient/client because of their personal issues, values, attitudes, mood, or common experiences. Those practitioners who reflect regularly will know themselves well enough to act in-the-moment. “Given the demanding and difficult work working with vulnerable and wounded people, self-reflective practice is imperative for self-care to manage the mental health of the professional to combat and address compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization” (J. Griffin, personal communication, Nov. 24, 2009).

Course Structure

The Facilitation Techniques course has several objectives: to understand the theoretical underpinnings associated with therapeutic intervention used by TR professionals in theory-based practice; to gain a comprehensive understanding of a variety of specific TR facilitation techniques and their application to various client groups including diverse cultures; to gain experience in the facilitation of TR interventions; to increase competency in self-reflective practice; to learn about a variety of processing techniques used in TR interventions; and to acquire competencies in accordance with Therapeutic Recreation Ontario’s (TRO) Standards of Practice (2003) related to program delivery. A very important component of this course is ice breaker activities during the initial classes, because students need to know each other well enough to ensure they are comfortable in their role-plays. Ice breakers help to develop trust just as much in a university class setting as they do in a therapeutic setting. In addition,

these exercises allow students to gain insight about their ability to experience, tolerate, and cope with vulnerability, which is also a

similar process to what our clients are experiencing. Consequently, students consciously or unconsciously build empathy, appreciation, and compassion around the difficulty of sharing emotional vulnerability. (J. Griffin, personal communication, Nov. 24, 2009)

Prior to the co-facilitation of the activities, lectures with experiential components on active listening, group facilitation, and processing are given. In addition, the recreation therapist (RT) gives a guest lecture featuring small group exercises and proper group techniques; students have an opportunity to lead a group. They are very shy and overwhelmed by this; confidence is low. Also students learn about role-play.

Role play. We all occupy many roles not just throughout our life, but throughout the day. Milroy (1982) defines social role as “behavior expected of a person by virtue of the position he or she is occupying” (p. ix). Milroy further states that “how a person performs in a new role may depend upon motivation, aptitude, application and the extent and nature of the interest in or preparation for, the role” (p. xi). Performance is also affected by mentorship, expectations, and attitude. Role-play involves developing relationships, either one-on-one or one with a group. Milroy suggests that there are two reasons why role-play is used: “to develop skills in specific areas and to promote greater understanding of human behavior, which includes human problems” (p. 34). Preparing students to take on the role of “recreation therapist” upon graduation, therefore, requires experience in the role. While the best place to learn this is face-to-face during a practicum or internship, students need to gain some experience and aptitude prior to being thrust into a TR setting. In this course students take on several roles: the role of a co-facilitator of a group, of

various clients/patients who are receiving the intervention, observer and critical evaluator, and of course, the role of a student. Many students are very shy initially in adopting new roles, whether as a co-facilitator or group participant. Students are reminded that their feelings and issues are no different than those of our clients who come to groups that they will be facilitating in their professional careers; this helps to develop empathy and compassion. Following role playing, students reflect on their emotional reactions to each role in their daily journaling, which helps to develop self-reflection skills. To learn to be self-reflective students and practitioners, it is not enough to be lectured at; one has to experience it; one has to feel it. The transition and growth throughout the term in regards to role play is a pleasure to watch.

Co-facilitation. Students co-facilitate one intervention with a group of eight clients. Students are required to post summaries of the intervention and the client group who will be receiving the intervention 1 day prior to the class. Usually roles are assigned at this time. Presentations include formal summaries of the theory and research relevant to the facilitation technique followed by the facilitation group. Those students who are not presenting or participating in the group are responsible for evaluating the presenters and group process. This helps students to develop observation techniques such as non verbal behavior as well as the ability to critique presentations in a constructive manner. Following the presentation a full debriefing occurs with constructive feedback. Students are told that we are treating class as a practitioner would treat a group; they must be willing to take risks. If we expect our patients to come to group, to be willing to participate, and to be open to disclosing feelings and experiences, we should expect the same of students in TR classes.

Self-reflection paper. In the first class students are told to invest in a small journal in order to keep a daily self-nurturing log throughout the term; this helps them learn to be mindful every day. Students are told to try and be consistent, but not obsessive, about keeping the timing of entries at the same time of day. These journals are personal and will not be seen by anyone but the student. The students are told to do the following with their daily journal entries:

- Check in with how you're feeling
- What choices did (will) you make as a result of how you are feeling?
- Does anything stand out?
- What patterns do you see?
- How are you feeling about your choices, patterns etc.

Following the first class, students are given time at the end of every class to reflect on the class itself in addition to their daily journaling. The questions were suggested by the RT who uses them in her group interventions and leisure education groups. These are the instructions they are given for their class reflections:

1. Reflect on the activity/class: What have you learned? What part of the class stood out for you the most? How are you feeling about what you have learned?
2. Reflect on your emotions and feelings. Reflect on how you're feeling about the class. What mindset are you bringing to the class? What patterns do you see? What stood out the most for you "about yourself" during this class/presentation? What have you noticed emotionally? Any resistance? How is the pattern familiar to you in life? What have you learned? How are you feeling about what you have learned to-day?

Students put these reflections in a personal envelope and return it to the instructor after each class until they are returned at the second-to-last class in the term. Students are assured that the contents of these envelopes are confidential; the professor does not read them at any time. The professor stores these envelopes between classes to ensure that they are available at each class and returns them at the end of term for students to utilize when writing their life story.

Life story. The students use their daily reflections throughout the term from their journals and at the conclusion of each class in a final paper. This paper is written in the form of a life story where students look at defining moments, challenges, influences, transitions, and decisions that have led them to this university, this degree, this term, and this class. Students are also required to write their philosophy of life and philosophy of TR. Students are encouraged to use anecdotes from their journals to write their life story.

Writing one's life story can be very challenging, particularly when students are asked to keep the paper to a limit of 10 pages excluding references, appendices etc. One important direction to students is that they must respect personal boundaries; if something very challenging and personal has occurred, students may allude to it, but the professor requests that she not be privy to these personal details. Students are also encouraged to write two papers for two different readers: themselves and the professor. The only direction given to the students in constructing this paper is that it is their decision as to how they wish to review their lives. Most students have structured their paper chronologically; transitions tend to be identified as early years; primary school years; high school; university. However, one student, a devout

Christian, structured her paper in terms of the development of her relationship with God.

What students have to say. Students have been unanimously positive about the structure of this course and assignments. In course evaluations some of the common themes were:

1. The life story was the hardest but most important assignment I have had to date in my 3 years at university;
2. Students wrote personal poetry or cited poems like “The road not taken” by Robert Frost when discussing their decision to study TR;
3. In addition to writing their life story, students were also required to write a philosophy of life and a philosophy of TR. Students commented that this helped put their choice to be in TR into the context of their life based around core values;
4. The role-plays were difficult at first, but they taught us to be more empathetic towards our client groups; we *felt* their issues;
5. Students stated that the co-facilitations and role-play resulted in closer bonds with each other as they learned to trust each other;
6. Students did not all love journaling; some found it difficult to fit into their busy day; however, they all agreed that it taught them to tune into their emotions and mindset each day and think about how it impacted on their relationships with others and school; most felt that they would continue with this practice once they were in the profession;

Implications for teaching. The course has been taught twice to date. The following are a few recommendations for consideration:

1. The overall class size should be kept to a maximum of 25 students. This allows students to be involved as participants in several role-plays;
2. Ice-breakers in early classes are important to develop trust in each other through experiencing similar vulnerabilities;
3. The professor needs to set the tone where risk is expected; feedback by observers and participants must be constructive;
4. This is not a course for first year students; we offer it to 3rd year students because it does take some maturity to be engaged;
5. Some detail is needed for each role; students need to know how to act as “a senior with early stage dementia in a horticulture group”;
6. Group sizes should never exceed eight in number as this reflects a normal group size in TR practice;
7. Boundaries need to be established around privacy and confidentiality in terms of daily reflections and writing the life story;
8. There is one exam which focuses on knowledge of theories related to facilitation techniques.

Conclusion

I was overwhelmed by the life stories of the students. I learned so much about them as individuals outside of the class and outside of university. Students were incredibly open about their experiences and to date only one student has crossed the boundary of privacy. While I did speak to her about this as I felt her revelations were inappropriate, she was adamant that they defined who she was and did not mind sharing them. I disagreed.

Students felt that this class helped them to develop reflective habits that

would serve them well as TR professionals. I feel that many current professionals need to learn to be self-reflective, particularly those who have been in positions for a number of years. Too often practitioners gets caught up in the politics of their agency, the associated technical rationality, and proving that *what* they do makes a difference, when they need to be reflecting on *how* they as individuals *impact* others, either positively or negatively. Miller and Pedlar (2006) report that through their action research:

practitioners were able to really examine their own practice and to self-reflect and learn from the experiences, the dialogues, the exchanges with the people they served, as well as with other practitioners, which gave them a deep

understanding of the meaning of their practice, both to themselves and to others. (p. 37)

Smith (2006) states that "it is through our feelings, our consciousness, and our hopes, fears, and desires that we identify ourselves and everyone else as individuals...and through these we recognize our powers and limitations" (p.115). We are therefore able to be "ourselves". All TR students and practitioners need to know themselves intimately and can therefore *be* themselves. Through reflective practice RT's can provide the best service possible to their clients. "The opportunity for self-reflection exists for all of us" (Miller & Pedlar, 2006, p.43). Through the intellectual self-reflection process, everyone, including students will have a clearer understanding of reality and the here-and-now.

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