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Using an Experiential Group to Promote Engagement in a Career Counseling Course

Chad Luke

St. Bonaventure University, cluke@sbu.edu

Zach Budesza

Missouri Institute of Mental Health, University of Missouri-St. Louis, zrbudesza@gmail.com

Joel Diambra

University of Tennessee, jdiambra@utk.edu

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Abstract

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Career development and graduate counseling courses provide an opportunity to engage counselors-in-training in their own career development in order to evoke a parallel experience in their future clients. One approach to engaging students in these courses is through experiential education. The authors describe a pilot project using an experiential group technique embedded in a graduate-level career development and counseling course. The first author implemented a six-session group experience using peer facilitators to explore students' own career-related attitudes and behaviors and then transfer that experience to work with future clients. The inclusion of an experiential group in a career development and counseling course can help students make important connections across counseling curriculum and demonstrate the close ties between career and mental health concerns.

Keywords

career group, career counseling, experiential teaching, group dynamics

ENGAGEMENT IN CAREER COURSE

Career counseling can alter the trajectory of the lives of both counseling students and clients (Luke, 2018). In order to implement effective counseling for career-related issues, counselors-in-training must receive adequate training which includes knowledge and skill development (National Career Development Association [NCDA], 2020; The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Graduate career counseling courses are the initial contact with the knowledge, skills, and complexities of career counseling, for counselors-in-training (Osborne & Dames, 2013). Further, as Richardson (2012) and Blustein (2011) have long identified, work touches all people and affects all our lives, so the experience of studying career counseling can be one of the most personal and applicable experiences for students. In this expository article we review the NCDA and CACREP guidelines for guiding career counseling training, discuss the challenges in teaching a career counseling course, frame our efforts in experiential learning, share the course structure and activities that amalgamates experiential group process within a career counseling course. In our discussion, we connect our process and outcomes to previous research and provide implication for future consideration.

The career counseling course is often a source of frustration and challenge for faculty and students (Scholl et al., 2014). Faculty may be ambivalent about teaching a career counseling course (Savickas, 2012), and the faculty members with the least experience often take responsibility for the course (Savickas, 2013). The sheer amount of content within career counseling courses can be stressful for faculty and students (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Lindo et al., 2019). Students often show preference for courses which appear more clinical in nature, and view career counseling issues as less relevant to their practice (Luke, 2018; Gough, 2016). Despite these challenges, counselor educators view engaging students in career courses as a positive challenge (Osborn &

Dames, 2013). Counselor educators have emphasized the importance of broadening the scope to view career counseling's relevance across the lifespan (Lindo et al., 2019) and integrating theory and practice into personally relevant assignments (Hayden & Osborn, 2020; Chen, 2013). Incorporating students' creativity and life experience through active learning can increase student engagement across the counseling curriculum (Tang, 2009). Experiential groups can offer counselor educators a way of engaging students and highlighting important factors of career counseling. The purpose of this article is to offer a description of a course wherein an experiential group was implemented to promote student engagement in career counseling. This paper is presented as a conceptual description of a novel educational, andragogical course experience.

Active Learning through Experiential Groups

Active learning is a learning process in which students engage with their external environment while internally processing information and abstracting from their experience (Illeris, 2007). Active learning draws on teachers and students' creativity and investment in the world around them to integrate course content, motivation, and interpersonal relationships and increase student engagement (Hayden & Osborn, 2020; Young & Hundley, 2013). Active learning in career counseling courses reduces student reluctance and increases interest (Osborne & Dames, 2013). Students prefer assignments that are practical rather than theoretical and allow them to apply career theory to real world situations, such as case studies, and to their own lives (Osborne & Dames, 2013). By engaging students' creativity, curiosity, and motivation, active learning provides a method of teaching which energizes both students and teachers.

Although there have been only few innovations in career counseling andragogy (Luke, 2017) in counselor education over the last decade (Barrio Minton, 2019; Barrio Minton et al., 2014), recent work has provided standout examples of creative andragogy. Providing students with

real opportunities to apply their knowledge to their own careers and practice the skills of career counseling through active learning brings students into greater contact with the material (Hayden & Osborne, 2020; Osborne & Dames, 2013). Other applications of active learning use a “flipped classroom” approach, which improved students’ attitudes toward career counseling, increased their self-confidence in dealing with career issues, and helped them develop a better knowledge of how technology can benefit counselors and clients in career counseling (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015). By aligning career course content with experiential and process groups, students were also able to improve their application, comprehension, and integration of career theories into their work with clients (Lindo et al., 2019). In each of these course designs (e.g., Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Hayden & Osborne, 2020; Lindo et al., 2019), group activities provide an effective educational exercise, yet we found no literature implementing experiential groups coupled with career counseling.

Experiential groups in counselor education provide high-quality experiences which can be both personally and professionally meaningful for students. By engaging in a group process, students experience and develop a better understanding of the impact of vulnerability and universality possible in group counseling (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Students participating in these groups report personal growth, empathy, a desire to help others, greater insight into group topics and their own experience (Ohrt et al., 2014). Many students benefit most in experiential groups from self-disclosure, validation, and modeling (Kiweewa et al., 2013). While not without their limitations (Zhu, 2018), experiential groups provide an excellent format for instructors to help students develop personal and professional skills, better understand client experiences, and expand their understanding of the subject matter.

Applying experiential groups in career counseling education is a logical next step based on the effectiveness that both experiential groups and group processing in experiential learning have

in facilitating student learning. Previous work in this area (Fulton & Gonzales, 2015; Hayden & Osborne, 2020; Lindo et al., 2019; Osborne & Dames, 2013) suggests that experiential groups are an effective means to help students actively engage with course content, enhance interpersonal discovery, and to improve learning. Experiential groups allow students to quickly apply career counseling course content to a practice situation, helping them better understand the content, feel more invested in the course (Scholl et al., 2014), and develop more positive opinions and attitudes toward career counseling (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015). The course described below was formulated to allow students the opportunity to explore their career experiences and integrate the content from the career counseling course. The project was intended to be a demonstration of a student engagement technique and to collect anecdotal information from student participants. The purpose of the group experience was less about communicating specific career counseling content and instead about engaging the learners in a process in which they might otherwise experience ambivalence.

Description of Experiential Career Development Group Experience

Career Development is a required course taught by the first author. The annually offered 3-credit course is aligned with and measures 10 CACREP standards in the form of student learning outcomes. The Career Development course described in this article was offered in a four and a half weeks long summer term prior to the 2020 pandemic and delivered in a hybrid format. Students met twice per week for three-and-a-half hours, and completed course assignments outside of class, including online discussion board postings and community-based activities. Students also took part in the following novel experiential career development group.

Prior to registering for the course, students were notified that this section of the course would include an experiential group component, and that the course would be offered the following semester, sans the experiential group component. Students who enrolled in the summer course were sent a participant agreement form prior to the first class. On the first day of class, the course

instructor reviewed the participant agreement with the students. Students had the option to select an alternative course experience, if they did not feel comfortable participating in the experiential group activity. The participant agreement form highlighted several key points: (a) participation in the experiential career development group was voluntary, (b) students could opt out by completing the alternative activity, (c) their choice would not affect their course grade, (d) an experiential group description and participation details (e.g., duration, topics, process, etc.), (e) expectations for and limitations of confidentiality, (f) risks and benefits, and (g) a final caveat for participation (i.e., “the group process can be/feel therapeutic, but it is not therapy – not the place to work out your own private issues, nor should it be anyone’s intention to provide therapy to another group member”). All 12 students registered for the summer course signed the participant agreement form.

Facilitators and Students

The group followed a peer-facilitated process group model. Peer facilitation is a common training model for group counseling courses (Pollard, 2015), wherein students take turns facilitating an experiential activity, group process, or task to sharpen their skills in group leadership while in a safer class environment. This peer facilitation model was novel in that well-advanced counseling students – at least one year ahead of the students in the course – served as peer facilitators.

The course instructor selected two graduate counseling students who had finished their coursework and internships for this project as peer facilitators. These facilitators participated in this experiential group as part of an independent study to complete their academic program. Both students had completed internships in clinical and university settings. Each had specific experience in career development counseling with college students, and each was trained in facilitating experiential groups by the course instructor. These facilitators were under the direct supervision

of the instructor of the career course, who also directed their respective independent studies. The facilitators met with the course instructor prior to and immediately following each experiential group session, in addition to pre-course planning sessions and post-course debrief. As part of their independent study, the facilitators completed reflection activities for each group session. In addition, the facilitators attended every class session to familiarize themselves with the course content to which their group participants would be exposed.

Twelve students participated in the career development course. The course had no prerequisites, so student participants were at various stages of their program. Nine (75%) had completed at least a year of coursework that included the group course and practicum while three (25%) participants had not yet completed the first year. Three (25%) were in the school counseling track and nine (75%) were in the clinical mental health counseling track. The participants in the group all identified as women.

Process

The instructor of the course directly observed each experiential group process but was not a participant or facilitator of the actual group. The roles were kept separate to protect group students from discomfort or potential harm related to dual role. The instructor prepared group participants for the group experience by describing the range of potential emotional intensity, wherein 1, 2, or 3 on a 10-point scale would represent low intensity (e.g., personal grooming). At the other end of the scale, 7, 8, 9, or 10 represent high emotional intensity (e.g., personal tragedy or trauma). In the middle of the range, a 4, 5, or 6, represented moderate emotional intensity (e.g., relationship conflict, career indecision, and finances). Students acknowledged that experiential groups are less effective at either end of the spectrum, wherein there is either little emotion or excessive emotion. This set the stage for safety expectations for group participation and indicated

that facilitators would encourage emotional engagement when low and block members from sharing unprocessed, high intensity information when doing so led to excessive emotional reactions.

The experiential group began on the second day of class. The instructor collected and filed signed participant agreement forms. Each experiential group session included an activity designed to move the group through the stages of group development (Gladding, 2020). Facilitators used an activity at the start of each group meeting to energize participants toward engaging in reflection on a topic related to career. Given the dearth of literature on using experiential groups in a career counseling course, the instructor and the facilitators co-constructed the activities. Due to the phenomenological nature of experiential activities, activities were open-ended and used to generate energy in the group rather than approaching activities from a positivist perspective. The sequence of topics was emergent, as decisions for the direction of the next group were made by the facilitators based on the content and process of the previous group meeting.

Group Stages and Therapeutic Factors

Groups evolve over time, moving from tentativeness to engagement (Gladding, 2020). Students enrolled in a course can go through a similar evolution, especially when an intentional, experiential group model is implemented. The class did in fact evolve according to Tuckman's (1965) groups stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning, through Yalom's (2005) therapeutic factors. Instructors using an experiential group approach can use these group stages to track class cohesion and the level of engagement of individual students and the class. Group stages represent a type of formative assessment of students. These stages are described next, in association with related therapeutic factors described by Yalom (2005).

Forming - Building Cohesion

Stage one of group development typically involves supporting members as they explore roles and rules in the group setting and establish relationships with others in the group (Gladding, 2020; Tuckman, 1965). Cohesion can be defined as “sense of unity and attachment to the group” (Marmarosh & Sproul, 2021, p. 171). For this first group, the facilitators modified a “fishbowl” activity (Chen & Rybak, 2018) using career-related statements. Prior to the start of group one, the facilitators used masking tape to create three squares on the classroom floor in three sizes. Each square was larger than the previous one and they were placed outside the previous. This left three concentric squares taped to the floor. Group members were asked to stand outside the largest square to start. The facilitators read career-related statements and asked members to move toward the center in relation to their comfort level with the statement. The innermost square represented greater comfort or agreement with statements, whereas the outermost square represented least comfort or agreement. After each prompt, group participants discussed their decision and associated feelings to move in, move out, or stay put. Activities like this help to diffuse anxious energy and lower defenses, which lead to greater transparency, as members were able to experience the career-related statements physically, and then discuss their perspectives.

Storming – Values, Roles, and Existential Factors

During the second group, students participated in a modified survival scenario activity. Activities like this (see <https://www.crystalspringsfoundation.org/docs/Survival%20Pre%20and%20Post%20visit%20activities.pdf>) are often used for team-building, but they also can illuminate participants’ values. The purpose of this group activity was to continue to build group cohesion, while also drawing out views of vocation and self. Briefly, the activity described a hypothetical scenario in which 12

individuals – some with family members – are in a bomb shelter following a nuclear attack. The shelter only has enough resources to sustain five people for two weeks. Participants in the activity were instructed to select five people to survive two weeks until the fallout clears. Group members completed a checklist individually, and then had to work in small groups wherein they came to a unanimous decision about those who would survive. In order to evoke more potential bias, each potential survivor had distinct characteristics with implications for their relative contributions to the post-nuclear society. These included racial, ethnic, able-ness, religious, gender and sex, regional, age, and other factors that might influence participant perception of the value and contributions of each individual. Participants gain insight into their own values by making difficult choices based on limited resources.

Norming - Universality

Group three utilized a modified fear-in-a-hat ice-breaker (Chen & Rybak, 2018). The more common activity is to ask group members to write down a fear they have about a topic, anonymously. These topics are placed in a proverbial hat, and the hat is then passed around the group. Participants take one “fear” out of the hat and read it, responding as if they had written it. This is repeated with each participant reading a fear. The activity is processed by noting commonalities across fears, evoking the therapeutic factor of universality. Members also get the opportunity to experience another person’s fear vicariously. For the purposes of the career group experience, facilitators asked members to identify two categories of fears: group experience-related and career-related, each anonymously. Rather than reading each fear as if it were their own, members simply read out the fear and the group responded to it. The purpose of this modification was to assist the group in recognizing two distinct types of “fears” that career-group members may encounter and aid in making implicit fears explicit. The facilitators processed the exercise with the

group in the hope that members would feel heard and also recognize fears about both group and career as universal experiences among members. Process prompts included, “Discuss your fears and reactions to hearing your fears read aloud; What did you notice from the group while we discussed the fears? How could we help reduce fears in this group? For those who wrote a career fear, talk about your reasons for doing so; Was anyone surprised by a fear? Were any of the fears similar?” Participants learn that they are not alone in their experience (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Performing – Interpersonal Learning

There is a broad body of literature supporting the use of experiential activities to assist students and others develop multicultural competence (Roaten & Schmidt, 2009). This has also been applied to career development (Osborne & LoFrisco, 2012). A common group dynamics activity for understanding individual differences is “the privilege walk”, which has been used to enhance counseling students’ cultural awareness (Rothman et al., 2012). It has been used in a variety of settings to highlight disparities. Briefly, the activity begins with participants lining up, shoulder to shoulder, about two feet apart facing forward. The facilitator begins reading prompts, followed by instructions to take, for example, one step forward or backward depending on how the prompt relates to them. At the conclusion of approximately 30 prompts, the differences among individuals within a group are stark, with some individuals out front, some way in the back, and the rest dispersed somewhere in between. This activity makes concrete the often abstract notion of privilege.

Sample prompts from this activity included, “If you felt proud about the jobs you have had, take a step forward.” “If you were ever denied employment because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.” “If you have ever received a job based on who you knew, take a step forward.” “If you had strong family role models of what career should be, take a

step forward.” Sample process prompts for the entire group following the career prompts included, “What is your gut reaction to where you find yourself at the end of this list of privileges?” “Are you surprised where you are?” “How does it feel to be standing in your location (e.g., front/back/middle/alone)?”

Performing - Catharsis

The group utilized a roughly named “crap basket”, wherein members were able to discard, flush, or save, any emotions or situations with which they entered the group setting as a form of catharsis (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Many times, group members bring to bring with them the thoughts and feelings from their experiences immediately preceding the group meeting, or lingering responsibilities to which they must attend following the group meeting. Therefore, the purpose of this group activity is to link sessions together by inviting members to share, in writing, any residual emotions from the previous groups or from the current day. For this group, facilitators provided members with a note card and pen and asked members to respond anonymously, in writing, to the following: “What are you bringing into the group that may be outside of the group that is not letting you be present? Identify one feeling, thought, emotion, anything that you think defines the group based on the previous session”. Once written, facilitators invited participants to deposit their cards, (i.e., emotions) in the “crud bucket.” This assisted in making implicit emotions explicit, while maintaining a degree of anonymity. It also provided members the time to explore their thoughts and feelings and to be intentional about whether they wanted to verbally express those same ideas or emotions in group.

Adjourning – Installation of Hope

Adjourning or terminating group sessions are generally designed to assist members in exploring their feelings about leaving a space wherein they may have experienced emotions,

relationships, and insights (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2015). It is further intended to review, summarize, and cement the process of translating group experiences into practice in their daily lives. For this last group, the facilitators used a “take-it-or-leave-it” activity to achieve the above stated purposes. Facilitators asked participants to reflect on a main takeaway from the career-group experience and an aspect they wanted to “leave behind” (i.e., attitudes, behaviors, perspectives they wanted to abandon). In order to disambiguate the activity, facilitators provided members with concrete examples. For example, takeaways might include insights into behaviors, attitudes, and new world of work knowledge; leave-behinds might include dysfunctional thoughts or self-defeating beliefs and feelings related to career. Facilitators then led participants through a process of action planning related to their takeaways and leave-behinds once the group concluded. At the end of the experiential group session, the instructor, along with the group facilitators, led the class through a group participant debrief, both to ascertain member wellness and to draw tangible links to ways they might integrate the whole group experience into their career counseling work with future clients.

Wrapping up the Course

Prior to each group session, the course instructor met with the group facilitators to review the upcoming session plan and to prepare alternative strategies in case the groups did not go according to plan. Following each group session, the course instructor again met with the group facilitators to ascertain their impressions of the experience and to allow them to reflect, debrief, and plan ahead. The class met as a whole to identify lessons about a) their own career development; b) their ability to identify and work with career related concerns of their future clients; and c) to highlight their perceptions of the role of group work in general, and group work applied to career development specifically. Students in the course, as well as the peer facilitators, acknowledged

that career issues are more personal, complex, and pervasive than they realized prior to this group experience. They further identified the role of groups and experiential activities in leading to personal change, both for themselves and their future clients.

Recommendation and Implications for Counselor Educators

Counselor educators are in the business of preparing and helping counseling students to good, by effectively working with future clients, and do well, by gaining employment as counselors. Teaching a career counseling course is one element of this larger clinical and vocational effort. Combining group activities and processes into a career counseling course provides a novel instructional strategy that can address several issues identified in the literature. This manuscript has described six specific experiential activities, one for each student of group development, as it applies to teaching and learning career counseling skills. Several recommendations for career counseling course instructors include creating an experience for students that engages them and challenges ambivalence about the course, connect students' own career development process while engaging career counseling course material, use the experiential component of the course to illuminate the connections between mental health and career concerns, connect the process of student experience in a course with the stages of group development to multiply the learning experience, and engage students in practicing skills as well as being recipients of "interventions". These recommendations are discussed in greater detail below.

Group experiences for graduate counseling students has been shown to increase a sense of safety among students (Urkmez et al., 2021). Using group activities within a career counseling course can attend to Savickas' (2012) concern about faculty member and student ambivalence, enhance student engagement and appreciation of career counseling (Osborne & Dames, 2013), bolster student self-awareness of their own personal career journey (Richardson, 2012; Blustein,

2011), increase student recognition of privilege and its impact on the counseling relationship and client career aspirations (Luke, 2018), present students with engaging activities (C. Osborn et al., 2012), and expose future counselors to here-and-now clinical activities (Gough, 2016; Lindo et al., 2019) they may later utilize when providing career counseling.

As part of the preparation process, students learn about career counseling as a component of helping clients, and in tandem, as part of their own career development process in becoming counselors. This parallel learning process enables counselor educators to challenge students to recognize that their own career development journey, acknowledge their natural link to clients' navigating a career path, and to consider the similarities and differences. Counselor educators can help counseling students awaken to the here-and-now awareness of their own career development journey as they sit in a career counseling course. Prompting counseling students to recognize this parallel process and take advantage of their own journey creates a meaningful point of reference for the importance and ubiquitous nature of career counseling for all clients.

Mental and physical health is inextricably linked with decent work (Duffy et al., 2019). Mental health counselors have similar opportunities to explore with their clients the impact of their work on their mental health and mental health on their work (Luke & Gibbons, 2022). Whether clients are already working full-time jobs, part-time jobs, seeking employment, or retired, work identity and satisfaction are relevant issues in many counseling relationships. From diagnosis (i.e., work or social life functioning assessment) to ongoing basic needs and their impact on daily life and routine functioning, work influences our mental health. Career counseling in groups could be readily adapted to human resource departments in companies or community mental health agencies. Using group format would more readily reach greater numbers of people and highlight the universality and ubiquitous nature related to career journeys and various people groups.

The integration of career counseling and experiential groups in counselor education can provide counselor educators with new options to engage students in content heavy courses (Hayden & Osborne, 2020). By offering students the opportunity to experience universality, interpersonal learning, and group cohesiveness (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), students can better understand the benefits a group process has for exploring career issues. The description of the group above may provide a helpful resource for instructors planning to facilitate career focused group sessions, but the unique process of each group must be considered. The intention, preparation, time, and energy required to adequately plan, form, implement, and process groups cannot be understated. Course instructors and group facilitators should plan ample time for students to consider, reflect, and react to course material and small group experiences over time, beyond each session.

Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) therapeutic factors provide guidance for the integration of career counseling and experiential groups. In groups focused on reviewing and exploring their own career development paths, counselors-in-training will hear about classmates' struggles and successes and identify the common themes that unite them (i.e., universality). Classmates will share different considerations, options, resources, job market information, etc. (i.e., imparting information). Classmates' career stories may provide context and meaning to others (i.e. altruism). Students may have the opportunity to reevaluate cultural expectations from parents, caregivers, or family (i.e., corrective recapitulation of the primary family group). Socializing techniques, imitative behaviors, and interpersonal learning could be implemented by creating fishbowl mock interviews followed with direct feedback by classmates for practice purposes. It seems natural that some students will experience heightened emotional awareness during the group process and that taking personal responsibility for their own career decision-making process will naturally occur.

Career counseling-focused experiential groups allow counselor educators further integration of skill and attitudes across the curriculum. Counselor educators can use experiential groups to highlight the parallels of predictable and cyclical group stage progression (e.g., forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning/terminating; Tuckman, 1967) These groups also illustrate the ever-evolving developmental process of career decision-making to counseling students. Counseling students are afforded the opportunity to generalize and integrate counseling concepts across the eight domains of counselor education as they recognize similar patterns across different aspects of development and growth. The use of experiential groups provide a cross-cutting educational opportunity that can reinforce career counseling as vital topic in counseling and counselor education.

Future researchers can consider investigating several inquiries related to integrating career counseling instruction and group processes. Specific inquiries may include comparing counseling student learning and/or satisfaction with and without the use of groups in career courses, investigating how salient group therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) occur within career counseling groups, and systematically exploring similarities and differences between group stages and career development stages. Counselor educators may also consider how experiential groups increase student engagement when compared to designs such as flipped classrooms, project-based learning, and more traditional lecture-based teaching.

Conclusion

Career counseling is an integral part of counseling curriculum (ACES, 2016) which has a direct effect on the lives of clients and students (Richardson, 2012). Unfortunately, faculty and students often approach career counseling courses with a mix of trepidation and disinterest (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Savickas, 2012). The combination of the amount of material covered, the least

experienced faculty teaching it, and a preference for more obvious clinical connections often transforms career counseling courses into a chore than a learning opportunity (Luke & Redekop, 2016). Here we propose the use of experiential groups which allow students to explore their own career development in parallel to career counseling material. The process of one career-focused experiential group is described as a potential template for future endeavors into career groups. We hope our description of engaging group activities infused into a career counseling course refuels a desire for counselor educators and students to rise to the challenge posed by Osborne and Dames (2013). Career is a critical part of life, and counselors must consider career counseling as a valuable and effective way to assist clients struggling on their career journey.

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