INTRODUCTION: TEACHING TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING AND THERAPY COURSES

# Activities—Function Or Filler?

As instructors, we are aware that our students bring with them a range of preferred learning styles. We also know that while most people do not learn best by “chalk and talk,” many instructors still rely on this teaching approach. Finally, we additionally know that every time that an additional “sense” is added to the learning process, the percentage of retained information will likely increase. Although well-designed, well-timed, and well-executed activities can effectively address the above, the use of activities, including icebreakers, is often not utilized by instructors as fully as possible. I strongly advise you to avoid using icebreakers and other activities as “fillers.” Activities not only offer variety to the instructional process—breaking up information conveyed via lectures and other more traditional teaching approaches—they also offer students a shared springboard. More specifically, there is tremendous value in having students experience an activity together and then compare, contrast, and process their shared and differing individual experiences, perceptions, and “take-aways.” (Refer to Appendix VI for additional information about icebreakers.)

Included in this Instructor’s Manual (IM) is an icebreaker, entitled “The Mistreated Giant” (Appendix II)—my rewrite of the fairy tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” to include issues related to oppression, power, and perspective, as well as to provide the necessary “right-left” element of this icebreaker. This activity has allowed me to get a feel for and address the students’ expressed goals and concerns at the beginning of the course, facilitate class cohesiveness and name recall and has been an effective springboard for introducing some of the basic components of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy.

# Go-Rounds

Students and instructors will likely find Go-Rounds to be a useful processing, assessment, and instructional course tool. Go-Rounds take place at the beginning of each class, starting with the second class meeting. In a Go-Round, each student individually verbally shares their primary take-away from the previous class and/or assignment(s); students can also share something that has transpired during the intervening week that is not directly related to the readings, assignments, or what transpired in class, but is still related to the area of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy. Consistent with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) “Action” component, I also use this time to identify, and give kudos for, instances of student “praxis,” where course content/discussion has led to critical reflection and action. An example of student praxis was when a student, who was employed as a mental health worker at a nationally acclaimed psychiatric hospital, successfully convinced her department to purchase multicultural crayons for the children in their pediatric unit.

I named this class opener “Go Round” because students literally go around the circle sharing one thing that they remember, took away, had an insight about, were disturbed about, thought more about, and so on, related to our most recent class/assignments. By sharing information in this way, all students have an opportunity to speak—the stage is theirs—and to engage in active listening. It also increases student openness to and curiosity about the narratives and experiences of others, facilitates student “ownership” of the course and its content and increases cultural humility. It additionally helps to quickly bring students back to what took place during the preceding week so that we can efficiently move into the theme of the current class. Finally, as the instructor, I use the Go-Round as an opportunity to highlight, reinforce, clarify, and supplement what has been said.

# Ground Rules

It is not unusual for students to have concerns, especially at the beginning of this particular course, about what might take place in class. Examples of such concerns are that the student may say or do the “wrong” thing, discover that they are “prejudiced,” and/or may be misinterpreted by others. The collective anxiety is often palpable. While some discomfort and “dissonance” is an important component of constructive change in this area, excessive anxiety or concern can have the opposite effect.

I have found it critical to collaboratively develop a set of “ground rules” for the course, during the first course meeting. These rules help to create a collectively agreed-upon environment in which authentic, challenging, respectful, and “safe” dialogue can take place. The rules help identify and address student concerns, as well as increase the likelihood that student—and instructor—goals for the course will be met. This activity also provides an additional vehicle for instruction.

I conduct this activity using an acronym—R-E-S-P-E-C-T—which not only conveys an important element of the course, and Multicultural Counseling and Therapy, as well, but also provides letters that will cover most of the concerns, wishes, and goals that students are likely to have (see Appendix I).

# “If It’s Unmentionable, It’s Unmanageable”: Handling Challenging Situations

The Judge Baker Good Grief Program, in Boston, Massachusetts, embraces the following concept: “If it’s unmentionable, it’s unmanageable.” I encourage you—my fellow course instructors—to adopt this as one of your guiding principles. It should come as no surprise that a course that focuses on a topic that continues to be such an increasingly vitriolic and loaded one for our country, would be expected to result in challenging, oftentimes uncomfortable conversations and situations inside—and possibly also outside—of the classroom. I strongly believe that if students cannot have these difficult discussions in a “controlled” and emotionally “safe” class setting, then where can such discussions take place? I am not suggesting that students should be coddled or overprotected. Rather, for such discussions to become maximally meaningful and transformative, the 400-pound gorilla must be “named.” We do our students (and their future clients) a disservice, to do otherwise. As instructors, we become important classroom models of effective ways to engage in this naming, claiming, and transformation process. By exhibiting constructive ways to discuss emotionally charged issues in a non-defensive way, we encourage students to courageously own, examine, and alter their beliefs, feelings, worldviews, and issues that would likely interfere with their effectiveness as a multicultural counselor and embracer of social justice. It is through this naming, claiming, and “taking students where they’re at” process, that the “unmentionable” can lose its powerful often paralyzing hold on students and real student change can occur.