

Fostering Connection and Authenticity in Online Counselor Education through Relational Pedagogy

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Abstract

In this conference summary brief, the authors examine the need for connected teaching in higher education's rapidly evolving digital age. Counselor educators will benefit from utilizing Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as a foundation for online education. While highlighting aspects from Harriet Schwartz's (2019) book on connected teaching, the authors explore some tools to increase relational clarity, such as the mindful pause and making small moments bigger. This article is based on a presentation at the Counselor Education Distance Learning Conference hosted by Palo Alto University in February 2021.

Keywords

relational cultural theory, online education

What does it mean to connect with our students? How can we think about this sense of connection in a rapidly changing digital age? As posed by Harriet Schwartz (2019), these questions stress the notion of mattering in online and distance education. Given the influx of hybrid and online Counselor Education programs in recent years (Snow et al., 2018), it is paramount to reevaluate our pedagogical approaches to counselor education. One framework for training counselors is Relational Cultural Theory (RCT; Jordan, 2010; 2017). Within the counselor education literature, RCT has been applied to experiential coursework (Lertora et al., 2020), supervision (Lenz, 2014), and doctoral-level advising (Purgason et al., 2016). A relational approach posits learning as a byproduct of the interaction between people through mutual empathy, empowerment, and authenticity (Lertora et al., 2020). In nurturing these connections, students are empowered and develop a sense of self-worth. Educators, in turn, flourish professionally and personally, potentially reducing attrition and burnout.

Moreover, the teacher-student relationship demands an exploration of inherent power dynamics (Schwartz, 2019). Education requires educators to actively address the issues of race, gender, and class. Instructors must not replicate the power structures;

when doing so, systems of privilege are further rooted (hooks, 1994). However, "we are far less aware of our identities that grant us privilege than those that bring marginalization, discrimination, hate, and violence" (Schwartz, 2019, p. 7). Instructors also need to name the power difference in the professor-student relationship as full transparency is critical. As hooks (1994) described, "professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive" (p. 21). Indeed, having a sense of vulnerability is necessary for the relational space to grow and flourish.

Connected Teaching

When students and teachers are connected, they both grow and change (Schwartz, 2019). However, questions remain for online educators. How do we show up authentically for our students in an online world? How do we best address power differentials in a way that fosters growth, and how can we do this remotely? Moreover, why are these practices so important given the changing face of higher education? Having an open dialogue about best practices to stimulate, inspire, and bring together professionals interested in learning and sharing about connected teaching in a

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rapidly changing, digital world.

Simply put, instructors bear the responsibility for bringing a sense of intentionality to their relationships with students and are also accountable for addressing their students' disconnection. In essence, faculty are the "shepherds of growth and relational well-being in academia" (Schwartz, 2019, p. 149). Modeling or speaking to our narrative can foster student vulnerability and safety in the room. In sharing our own stories of how we came to be counselors and educators, and by revealing who we are, students may feel more compelled to share, reflect, and become the reflective practitioners needed.

These moments of educator vulnerability and narrative reveals are linked to the idea of mattering. If students feel instructors care about their well-being, the power difference lessens, and students experience increased trust and safety. This trust, then, can extend throughout the counseling program and into clinical experiences. As this mutuality develops between teachers and students, students' confidence in themselves takes root. Via the isomorphic process (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014), counselors in training can lean into their moments of vulnerability in authentically connecting with clients.

Online and Distance Education

In our digital age, these conversations take a different course, as we must learn how to shape the unique and complex learning space best. While notions of growth-fostering relationships, mutual empathy, and authenticity can translate from the face-to-face classroom, disconnections can happen readily in a world of Zoom meetings, discussion boards, and email announcements. Disconnection leads to decreased energy and productivity, potentially increasing withdrawal and confusion about sense of self and relationships (Lertora et al., 2020). Relational maturity must begin with the instructor and requires an understanding of vulnerability and openness to be impacted by another person. However, there are challenges associated with this level of relational engagement and care for students. Online instructors need to work hard to meet students' needs and challenges and may experience stress and burnout. In these moments of tension, Schwartz (2019) recommends educators work towards having relational clarity - experiencing the relationship with a sense of awareness of where our feelings and experiences stop and where our students' experiences begin. To discern this sometimes diffuse boundary, Schwartz offers up the strategy of a "mindful pause," as discussed in the next section.

Tools for Relational Clarity

Counselor educators, in particular, encounter specific

challenges in addressing student personalization issues. For example, in an online class exploring race, privilege, and marginalization, student emotional experiences and behaviors may elicit intense emotions from the instructor and class. Instead of immediately replying to an email or discussion post, educators can take a mindful pause. This break will help the instructor to ascertain their emotions more clearly. A conscious delay could take form in many ways. Perhaps it is a quick 30-minute consultation with a colleague or friend. The educator may take some breaths, identify their own emotions as separate from the student, and generate questions to help them process the issues. The professor may also deem it critical to connect with the student at this point, inviting them to enter into a more authentic space to process their thoughts and emotions. Through the mindful pause, boundaries can solidify, and relational clarity is maintained while the relationship develops between student and instructor. This example also points to the value of mitigating a potential disconnection between the professor and student.

Another strategy for maximizing the relational connection between student and professor may take place within smaller moments. Schwartz (2019), specifically, encourages educators to look for "small moments" to make them bigger. In the online world, there are frequent, mundane communication points between students and professors. Often bombarded by a deluge of emails concerning assignment expectations, deadlines, and syllabi discrepancies (to name a few), educators become discouraged. However, a small moment, such as a more personal email or exchange, has the potential to alchemize into a moment of connection and mattering. Perhaps instructors can find bigger moments within a genuine, authentic response to a student's email. A humorous meme could be shared with the student to build upon the shared experience of communicating and relating through email. Indeed, Schwartz (2019) lauds the practical use of appropriate humor to help connect. Perhaps the professor notices something unique about the student, and in their response, points out this student trait in an affirming and energizing way. In turn, this is an invitation for the student to respond in a meaningful way. This seemingly mundane exchange transformed into something meaningful for both instructor and student.

When educators demonstrate relational clarity, they model the level of awareness and vulnerability endemic to the profession of counseling. Connected teaching can be as involved as diving into the emotional process to attain relational clarity. Connected teaching can also be as simple as letting a student know that meeting them after class is the essence of what it means to be an educator—making time, carving

out space for students to connect with us in these moments. These big and small moments feed us and protect against the mundane tasks and university minutiae that depletes energy and obfuscates career vision. Furthermore, it is essential to know that we are never truly alone as educators. In addition to meaningful relationships formed with students, our colleagues' and mentors' voices become critical parts of our teaching philosophy (Schwartz, 2019). This sense of connection is increasingly more important given the current challenges in higher education.

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