Counsellor Education as Part of Inclusive Liberal Education

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Abstract

Perhaps one of the most effective ways for counsellor educators to respond to contemporary challenges both within and outside of the academy is to position themselves and their work more centrally with respect to contemporary debates surrounding both higher education and the delivery of human services. By adopting, and identifying with, the curriculum content and scholarly goals of a relevant and inclusive liberal education, counsellor eduction might assist both counsellor educators and student counsellors to act as *bona fide* scholar-practitioners in ways likely to benefit the contemporary academy and society at large.

Résumé

Pour les conseillers éducateurs, situer leur profession ainsi que leurs travaux au centre des débats sur l'enseignement supérieur et la prestation des services sociaux constitue peut-être l'une des réponses les plus efficaces aux défis contemporains existant à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des établissements d'enseignement. La formation en counseling, en adoptant les programme d'études et les buts éducatifs d'une formation libérale appropriée et inclusive, et en s'y identifiant, pourrait permettre aux conseillers éducateurs et à leurs étudiants d'agir, en tant que praticiens et universitaires authentiques, pour que la société académique et la société en général profitent.

In my experience, most responses to perceived threats and challenges to applied programs in university contexts urge such programs and those offering them to become even more applied (in the sense of more immediately "field-relevant"), more modern or post-modern (in the sense of more welcoming and celebrating of inevitable change in an increasingly diverse technological and human world), and more efficient (in the sense of more students served and degrees granted). Depending on the exact substance of such proposals, I am in varying degrees of sympathy with them. At best, they endorse values of appropriate and necessary relevance, diversity, and productivity. At worst, they give uncritical primacy to fashion, marketplace, and dogma. In all of this, I believe that university-based counsellor educators might do well to ponder their possibly unique roles as liberal educators in an academy and society that sometimes seem to have forgotten the nature and value of education.

My purpose herein is not to make a set of specific, concrete recommendations for counsellor education, but rather to position counsellor education within the general framework of an inclusive liberal education. Unlike many other proposals for change in counsellor education,

my proposal is not cast in recommendations for particular skills and competencies, but in a more general appeal to the merits of an education that might assist counsellors to develop as thoughtful, educated people. My position is of course arguable, but I will be quite contented if I succeed in motivating readers to engage in considerations and debates relevant to my views and criticisms of them.

Against overly narrow specialization, technologism, scientism, and even charlatanism, an inclusive liberal education promises a breadth and diversity of intellectual and moral pursuits that initiate us into the best that humankind has produced in the way of knowledge, understanding, and practice at this point in its history—pursuits capable of equipping us with insights and critical tools with which to consider contemporary events and possible futures. I believe that we counsellor educators should endorse this kind of liberal education, and position ourselves and our programs within its practices and structures. Among other things, this involves accepting the rights and responsibilities of membership in bona fide communities of practicing scholars and humanists, both within and outside of the academy.

I will touch briefly on two features of the kind of liberal counsellor education I have in mind. In order, I will argue for (a) increasing the breadth and depth of curriculum content, (with an emphasis on substantive content and conceptual yield over technical considerations and instrumental concerns), and (b) resisting strong relativism in favour of ongoing scholarly debate and critique. I believe that important intellectual and moral understanding can be gleaned from participation in scholarly debates nested in an expanded, counselling-relevant curriculum. In combination with communicative competencies resident in traditional counsellor education, such understanding should help to prepare student counsellors to act as *bona fide* scholar-practitioners.

Curriculum Breadth and Depth

Anyone familiar with recent trends in the educational prescriptions offered by professional associations in the area of counsellor education knows all too well the increasing demands for ever more specialized course offerings and content (proliferating subdisciplines, subfields within subdisciplines, and focused exclusionary studies within these subfields and subdisciplines). I believe that such narrowness rapidly is turning us and our students into masters of increasingly local, possibly even trivial content, while increasing our ignorance of important ideas and perspectives that go beyond our narrow disciplinary concerns—ideas and perspectives that link us to the broader community of scholars and scholar practitioners. My proposed antidote for the kind of disciplinary narrowness I perceive is to encourage counsellor educators to open

their courses, their programs, and their conversations to a wider array of the intellectual content available in the contemporary academy. For example, when discussing cross-cultural issues in counselling I believe that students might benefit from a consideration of relevant literary sources that might include the works of individuals such as Isabel Allende (1985), Toni Morrison (1988), and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1976). When considering ethical issues in counselling, I believe attention to relevant work in moral philosophy by individuals like Charles Taylor (1989) might do much to combat the kind of facile proceduralism that I believe substitutes for genuine, informed human discretion and judgment in many such codes. When considering theoretical approaches to counselling practice, consideration of unconventional critical histories of psychological practice by scholars like Michel Foucault (1965) might be effective means of alerting students to historical, political, and other partisan influences on relevant psychological practices. When considering research on counselling, critical sociological and anthropological work such as that by Donna Haraway (1991) might help students to appreciate possible limitations of, and systemic flaws in, research in the social sciences, including research on counselling. These are only a few of many possibilities for linking study and experience in programs of counsellor education to a wider, more inclusive scholarly discourse of direct relevance to the understanding and practice of counselling.

While it obviously is not possible to do everything in counselling education programs, some sensible sampling of work from broader scholarly traditions might help to place many of the practices advocated by counsellor educators within appropriate intellectual contexts. Indeed, without such intellectual contextualizing, it might be hard for many students to extract much in the way of principled understanding from their encounters with these recommended practices. An excellent example of intellectual contextualizing can be found in McConkey's (1996) anthology of social scientific, literary, anthropological, and sociological writings on memory. It is difficult to imagine how any counsellor's functional understanding of human memory would not be enhanced significantly by careful attention to the various contributions to this volume. Recollected human experience is too rich and relevant a vein for counselling practice to be restricted to psychological and educational sources alone.

Part of the narrowness evident in many counsellor education programs may reflect a belief that recent, purported advances in psychological science and technology make counselling more akin to a kind of technical professional practice than to an area for liberal, humanistic reflection and interaction. If this is so, then clearly a broad disciplinary focus on diverse ideas may be seen as superfluous to preparing and initiating neophytes into this professional technology. I recently have

argued at some length against this view, both in this journal (Martin, 1995) and elsewhere (Martin, 1996; Sugarman & Martin, 1995). In general, my argument is to the effect that the subject matter of psychological inquiries, such as those common in counselling research, cannot be expected to furnish the kind of highly prescriptive, instrumental recipes for practice that such a technology would require. Human experience and actions are much too contextualized, uncertain, and morally saturated to yield so completely to the methods of physical science and engineering technology. This being so, we counsellor educators probably should focus as much on how we might understand our roles in helping relationships as on how to perform specific acts within these roles. This is not to say that the acquisition of practical skill is not an important part of counsellor education, but that such skill acquisition needs be understood and undertaken within more extensive considerations of what clients might be seeking and what kinds of interventions and resources might be appropriate and possible in assisting them. There is no magic step by step solution to most of the upsets and difficulties we experience in contemporary living. How we understand such difficulties and our attempts to ameliorate them probably are best informed by the kind of multidisciplinary study suggested above, rather than by decontextualized, technical programs of helping skills and strategies.

Scholarly Debate

A second feature of inclusive liberal education in counsellor education that I wish to discuss is the necessity for critical, scholarly debate as a resistance to strong forms of relativism that suggest that any theory, viewpoint, or belief is just as worthy, good, right, useful, and/or appropriate as any other simply because someone (philosopher, historian, psychologist, therapist, client or counsellor educator) holds it or expresses it. It might be assumed that my previous endorsement of curricular breadth and substantive content would be associated with an uncritical acceptance of diverse ideas, arguments, perspectives and beliefs in the hope that the more of these one encounters the better off one is, both in intellectual and practical terms. While I strongly advocate familiarity with, and study of, as wide an array of views and positions as is pragmatically possible, such awareness and study should not cause one to shy away from making judgments (and attempting to defend such judgments) concerning which ideas are more or less useful, reasonable, and appropriate for particular purposes. Ideas, and those who express them, always deserve a respectful hearing. They do not always deserve uncritical acceptance, and indeed there may be good and defensible reasons for rejecting them in relation to individual and collective purposes and projects. One need not subscribe to any notion of absolute, universal truth to recognize the futility of strongly relativistic approaches to know-

ing that would make all views, beliefs and theories equal. Nor is it necessary to stand outside of the views, perspectives, and theories one is considering (assuming some kind of god's-eye perch) to make appropriate judgment as to their relative merits. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1977) has argued convincingly for this conclusion.

Gadamer claimed that it is impossible to step outside of one's historical and sociocultural context when interpreting events and actions. Understanding always is perspectival. However, this conclusion does not mean that it is impossible to understand other perspectives and the traditions in which they are embedded. If genuinely good faith is extended in encounters between differing perspectives, it is possible to achieve functional translations of each perspective in terms of the others. The metaphor that Gadamer used to describe this important phenomenon was "a fusion of horizons." Gadamer believed that such fusions were both inevitable and desirable in enhancing human understanding. With respect to the avoidance of relativism, he argued that the justifications and warrants by which fusions might be judged could be derived from the traditions associated with the different perspectives involved. In this way, Gadamer pointed out that it was not necessary to occupy a totally objective, neutral position in order for interpretations from different perspectives to be translated, and to be judged as more or less useful or acceptable.

Gadamer's work is especially relevant to contemporary debates around both higher education and counsellor education. It suggests that the kinds of increasingly diverse viewpoints and voices demanding and deserving attention within such contexts need not lead either to a divisive fracturing of content and people into noninteractive ideological groupings, or to a bland, homogenized compromise that preserves little of importance from constituent views and arguments. What is required is an honest, authentic attempt to understand different, possibly even opposing, views and content, and to cope with resultant ambiguities and frustrations, with the promise of enlightenment. Gadamer's root metaphor of conversation suggests that much of what is required is contained in the very qualities that counsellors and counsellor educators have attempted to examine and exemplify in their own interactional practices with each other, students, and clients. While Gadamer's notion of fusion should not be equated with psychological empathy, the translation of perspectives he describes would seem to require respectful listening, careful consideration, and shared concern for both viewpoints and those who hold them. This being so, it may be that the avoidance of an intellectually stultifying relativism within the academy as a whole, requires many of the considerations and practices with which counsellor educators are concerned.

Concluding Comment

Sociocultural practices aimed at finding meaning, significance, and accomplishment in lived experience, and helping others to do the same, have a long and varied history, one which is inextricably entwined with the history of ideas and practices in philosophy, psychology, sociology, literary studies, and the broader humanities, arts, and social sciences. In this sense, counselling, as the study and practice of interpersonal social assistance and helping, is a particularly appropriate subject matter to approach through the kind of inclusive liberal education I have attempted to discuss. The study and practice of various traditions of helping and their fusions, past and present, are entirely compartible with the goals and missions of liberal education and the contemporary university.

I believe that counsellor educators, students of counselling, and programs of counsellor education are most likely to survive and flourish, in defensible ways, by identifying with a kind of inclusive liberal education that gives critical consideration to a wide range of ideas and practices associated with positive human development and changes. I believe that this course of action promises an important role for counsellor educators and counsellor education in contemporary society and within the contemporary academy—one which deserves continued and renewed support. Of course, it also makes undeniable demands on our time and energy by requiring us and our students to live as reflective scholar-practitioners in continuous interaction with ideas, and with others holding similar and dissimilar views. But, surely this is what does, should, and hopefully will continue to, happen at universities, and what marks the difference between education and training.

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