

Using Educator Self-Disclosure in Training to Model Cultural Dispositions

Counselor educators play a critical role in the facilitation of social justice and multicultural dispositions among students. A self-disclosure instructional strategy is discussed that involves educators modeling professional dispositions, including reflexivity and transparency, to foster student engagement in the multicultural learning process. A corresponding activity is presented in which a counselor educator engages students in exploring the educator's intersectional identities and cultural positionality through anonymous question asking.

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Counselor educators play a critical role in cultivating student engagement in the multicultural and social justice learning process (Burdine & Koch, 2021; Estrada, 2015; Yoon et al., 2014). Multicultural and social justice training can be an immensely challenging experience for counseling students. Counselor educators prod students to examine difficult subject matter, which is intended to raise students' consciousness (Pieterse et al., 2016). Students can experience a range of emotions as they strive to develop the critical consciousness associated with competent multicultural counseling practice (King et al., 2020). These emotions can present as resistances to the multicultural learning process, which may interfere with their engagement in the learning process and development of multicultural and social justice competencies (Dunn et al., 2014; King et al., 2020). The origins of student resistance could reflect a reasoned reaction to situations of cultural, social, or political marginalization but also could stem from an intrapersonal characteristic (Olson, 2013; Toshalis, 2015). With an ethical and professional responsibility to ensure trainees possess the competencies necessary for the provision of effective multicultural practice (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015), counselor educators must ensure their curriculum and instruction is grounded in anti-racist and inclusive ideology, which necessitates attention to the varied training needs of students based on their cultural and idiosyncratic experiences (Gonzalez & Cokley, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). Educators must be able to create a learning environment for all students that is relatively safe, attentive to student cultural resistances, and facilitative of student engagement in the cultural learning process (Ahluwalia et al., 2019; Seward, 2019; King et al., 2020; Basma et al., 2021; Dunn et al., 2014; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Moon & Sandage, 2019).

We discuss, in this teaching practice brief, educator self-disclosure as an instructional strategy beneficial to the cultural learning environment for students. Mentions of educators sharing about their multicultural journey and using appropriate self-disclosure within classrooms can be found in literature on instructor strategies for teaching multicultural training courses and navigating difficult classroom dialogues (Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Milan & Bridges, 2019; Nixon et al., 2010; Pulliam et al., 2019; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008; Reynolds, 2011; Yoon et al., 2014). Despite having a substantial literature base that mentions the importance of educator self-disclosure, missing are specific activities counselor educators may find useful during multicultural and social justice training. To that end, we present an activity entitled *Ask Me!* that uses an educator self-disclosure instructional strategy. Although educator self-disclosure can be used throughout counselor training, this activity may be particularly useful when introducing students to the required professional attitudes and behaviors conducive to multicultural and social justice learning.

Educator or instructor self-disclosure can be understood as “conscious and deliberate disclosures about oneself, aspects of one’s professional practice, world or personal views, personal history,

and responses to ongoing classroom events” (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008, p. 192). Educator self-disclosure has been found to increase student classroom engagement and instructor credibility (Cayanus et al., 2009; Kromka & Goodboy, 2021; Myers & Brann, 2009). An educator’s ability to display their humanity through disclosing their real-world experiences with complex cultural situations and demonstrating their commitment to anti-racist ideology can foster trainee openness to cultural learning (Seward, 2014; Dunn et al., 2014; Pulliam et al., 2019). Educator’s modeling reflectivity and self-disclosure may help students feel safer to talk about their identities and worldviews (Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Curtis-Boles & Bourg, 2010). Educators using self-disclosure within classrooms reflects a parallel process occurring between counseling students and their clients. In both situations, the formal authority figures weigh the merits and risks of self-disclosure. Decisions to disclose have a clear rationale that may be focused on rapport building, modeling appropriate disclosure, equalizing power, humanizing themselves, normalizing situations, and creating a safe nonjudgmental environment (see Henretty & Levitt, 2010, for additional rationales). Students can benefit from observing appropriate cultural self-disclosure, which is an important skill in cultural broaching (Heckman, 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Deciding to use self-disclosure requires intentionality as educators must weigh factors including amount, intent, depth, breadth, timing, relevance, appropriateness, honesty, topic and valence (Kromka et al., 2020). Foremost, educator self-disclosures must be done for the benefit of student growth and development rather than seeking empathy, sympathy, or accolades (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). Counselor educators should engage in significant personal reflection prior to and following self-disclosure of cultural worldviews or experiences with students. Educators should be relatively comfortable with self-disclosure and mindful of how students are being impacted receiving those disclosures (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). Students can have different reactions and resistances to educators based on their assumptions about the cultural identities of their instructors. Students may attribute competence and real-world cultural experience to educators of color, particularly when discussing race, while being apprehensive of White educators’ credibility to teach about social justice and multiculturalism (Brown et al., 2022; King et al., 2020; Pulliam et al., 2019). But also, educators of color and women can encounter students who question their qualifications, challenge their authority, and behave in disruptive and disrespectful ways (Beeman, 2015; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020). Student responses to these educators may be rooted in racism, sexism, and racialized sexism (Beeman, 2015; Brown et al., 2022). Helping students navigate the multicultural learning process can exact an emotional toll on educators, especially if they encounter microaggressions, microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Ahluwala et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2022; Salazar, 2009). Using self-disclosure in the classroom has the potential to shift the traditional power dynamic within the educational space with students holding power as educators present as vulnerable. Conceivably, it is possible that students could use educator self-disclosures to contend educator bias related to assignments and course grades. Additional risks for educators include potential negative course evaluations and grievances that could impact career advancement.

Counselor educators must also consider personal boundaries regarding how vulnerable to be in sharing personal experiences. For instance, educators may struggle in their decisional

process to disclose their affectional and sexual orientations to their students (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014). Not disclosing key aspects of personal identity can feel dishonest and like a personal betrayal (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015). Minoritized faculty may employ self-protective strategies, including being cautious in their transparency and self-disclosures, to maintain their well-being even as they help students navigate cultural resistances to the multicultural learning process (Brown et al., 2022). Educators should not be surprised when they are emotionally impacted by their disclosures, especially when done to address conflict within their classrooms, as vulnerability and personal sensitivity is often required to support student learning (Milan & Bridges, 2019).

Broadly, educators should ensure, through their self-disclosures, they are modeling professional attitudes and behaviors consistent with best practices in multicultural counseling practice and training (Yoon et al., 2014). The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016), to date, are the professional standards for competent cultural practice. The MSJCC's encompass essential aspects of cultural knowledge, personal awareness, and awareness of dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression counselors must possess but that also requires them to consider client issues within cultural contexts and have strategies to intervene with clients at individual and systemic levels. Examples of professional dispositions foundational to cultural competency development include counselor reflexivity, openness, nondefensiveness, and cultural humility (Melamed et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008; Zhu et al., 2021). Counselor educator modeling and demonstration of culturally-competent and socially-just dispositions and behaviors can positively influence student engagement with the multicultural learning process and reduce student resistances to cultural learning (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Pieterse et al., 2016).

Description of Teaching Innovation/ Instructional Strategy

Ask Me! is an instructional activity developed for educators to provide students, preparing to discuss cultural issues in a group context, with an opportunity to learn about their educators' cultural positionality through educator self-disclosure and anonymous question asking. Designed by the first author, the goals of this instructional activity are to help students (a) become aware of their educator's personal and professional experiences related to multicultural and social justice issues, (b) identify how individual and contextual factors can influence diverse cultural viewpoints, and (c) identify strategies to reflect on their intersectional cultural identities, bias, and knowledge. Through this instructional strategy, counselor educators can model for students the professional dispositions of reflexivity and cultural humility as they think and respond in an open manner to questions about their cultural identities, beliefs, and perspectives. This activity is grounded in anti-racist and inclusive ideology through its efforts to openly name, discuss, and begin to dismantle racist and other oppressive perspectives.

To facilitate this activity, educators must be knowledgeable of their intersectional cultural identities and reasonably comfortable publicly answering questions about their identities and cultural experiences. Educators need to be able to connect their personal experiences to socio-political ideologies and historical contexts that have impacted their beliefs and worldview. During this activity, educators have an opportunity to contextualize their cultural journey and experiences within historical, social, and professional frameworks. Educators should also familiarize themselves with literature on leading difficult cultural dialogues (Choudhuri, 2009; Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019), risks of self-disclosure (Yoon et al. 2014), addressing intersectionality (Chan et al., 2018), student resistances (Seward, 2019; Beeman, 2015; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2019; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; King et al., 2020), attending to resistance (Dunn et al., 2014), and the MSJCC's (Ratts et al., 2016) or the most updated cultural competence standards.

This activity requires between 45-60 minutes, depending on the number of participants. Materials needed are small index cards and pens. Alternatively, an electronic medium (e.g., Zoom, WebEx, or Microsoft Teams) can be used if there is a mechanism for students to submit questions anonymously. The instructions for facilitating *Ask Me!* are as follows:

1. Distribute a pen and small index card to all students. For electronic administration, ensure all students have access to the electronic medium.
2. Instruct students, "Do not write your name or otherwise write on the cards until invited." For electronic administration, instruct students, "Do not write your name or identify yourself in the questions or comments you will submit. Do not submit a question or comment until invited."
3. Inform students, "Engaging in cultural discussions can be challenging. One reason is that sometimes you have questions about cultural group beliefs and practices that you are afraid to ask for fear of how others will judge you. However, failure to ask your question or receive an answer can stifle your learning and participation. Additionally, students sometimes have questions about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of their instructors. This activity provides you with an opportunity to learn about the intersectional cultural identities, beliefs, and practices of your instructor(s). Through this activity, I/we will begin to introduce cultural topics and consider strategies for individually and collectively exploring those cultural aspects."
4. Inform students, "I/we will be introducing myself/ourselves and including information about my/our cultural backgrounds and intersectional identities for the purpose of inviting your questions."
5. Inform students, "You will be using the pen and index card [or the selected electronic medium] to write questions you would like me/us to answer regarding our intersectional cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, nationality), beliefs, practices, or opinions."
6. Inform students that each question may be answered with three responses:
7. A direct answer to the question without adding instructor reactions, feelings, or expressions about the nature of the questions.

8. An answer to the question with the instructor noting the feelings it evokes and personal reasons for those feelings, or
9. An answer that provides historical, social, professional, or published information aimed at increasing the learner's cultural knowledge and awareness.
10. For all responses, instructors should note how individual and contextual factors are relevant. Inform students, "I/we will attempt to respond to as many questions as possible. However, some questions may be intentionally skipped due to time constraints or the appropriateness of the question for the learning context."
11. Instructors should spend approximately 10 minutes introducing themselves. Specific attention should be given to disclosing intersectional identity information including their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, affectional identity, religious or spiritual identity, nationality, socioeconomic status, ability status, and other identity aspects. Additionally, instructors can share their professional and educational background information.
12. Instruct students to, "Write questions on the index card you would like me/us to answer regarding our intersectional cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, nationality), beliefs, practices, or opinions." Remind students to not write their name on the index card. Allow 3-5 minutes for this step. For the electronic administration, instruct students to, "Write and submit questions you would like me/us to answer regarding our intersectional cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, nationality), beliefs, practices, or opinions."
13. Collect the index cards or end the electronic submission of questions.
14. Instruct students, "I/We will be answering questions from our cultural positionality. Although instructors are sharing their perspectives and insights, that knowledge is reflective of our personal and professional biases."
15. Select and read questions from the index cards or electronic submissions. Attempt to answer each question with three (3) responses (see Step 6). When responding, educators should model honesty, openness, and genuineness.
16. Instructors can verbally invite follow-up questions after answering each question or at the end of the question answer period.
17. Process the activity using the following questions:
 - "What have you learned from this activity?"
 - "What have you learned about discussing multicultural and social justice topics?"
 - "What concerns do you have about exploring your cultural identities? What type of supports might you need from the instructor(s) and other students?"

An educator's ability to respond to student questions in Step 12 (that are detailed in Step 6) is critical to the modeling of cultural reflexivity and openness. The following is an example of a student question directed to the first author who disclosed identity information including intersections as a Black, cishet, male, able-bodied, religious, upper-middle class professor

from a working-class background in the Northeastern United States. A student asked, “Do you code switch (i.e., act differently in your home versus professional setting)?” The first author provided a three-part answer to the question. With each response, the first author was intentional in conveying reflectivity, openness, and humility. First, a direct answer was provided that acknowledged the first author’s use of coding switching between professional and personal settings to manage racial marginalization in an attempt to feel included and safe. Second, this author shared his feelings regarding code switching in reaction to marginalization. Additionally, the first author talked about specific situations that contributed to his code-switching abilities. Lastly, contextual information was provided to students that defined code switching and provided information about its functionality for minoritized persons in society. Step 14 is also crucial in the student learning process as educators lead discussion to help students identify key takeaways from the activity. In addition to the discussion questions, educators should discuss how their modeling of appropriate self-disclosure resembles a parallel process to counselors using self-disclosure to broach cultural topics with clients. However, educators should discuss how the structured self-disclosure process of *Ask Me!* differs from the spontaneous self-disclosure counselors use in-session to support clients.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Teaching Innovation/Instruction Strategy

Ask Me! is an instructional activity based on an educator self-disclosure instructional strategy. It is predicated on educators openly sharing information about their intersectional cultural identity experiences and connecting those experiences to socio-political and historical contexts. We have conducted evaluations of this instructional activity that are consistent with the *ACES Teaching Initiative Taskforce Best Practices in Teaching in Counselor Education* (Wood et al., 2016).

First, we solicit direct student feedback via debriefing discussions immediately after *Ask Me!* facilitation. We ask students questions aimed at understanding student perceptions of their educators’ openness about their multicultural identities and success in making connections to multicultural concepts and topics. Discussion questions include: (a) What cultural identities and subjects did I/we talk about? (b) What identities were not discussed? (c) How often would you say I/we discussed or provided cultural and historical information when I/we shared?

Second, we review student questions from the activity as a data point to determine if we created a space where students felt comfortable to ask questions — even risky politically incorrect questions. The following are student questions the first author has received that may be reflective of a learning space welcoming of difficult subject matter: “Why do some Black people say *axe* instead of *ask*?” “Do you assume that White people (especially White girls) perceive you negatively or as threatening based on race?” “Do you think some Blacks ‘play the race card’ and have a reason?” “What are your views on the ‘n’ word?”

Third, seasoned educators have conducted peer observation of teaching and *Ask Me!* facilitation. These educators have experience using self-disclosure as an instructional strategy including *Ask Me!*. They serve as process observers and provide feedback to educators on their openness. They also provide feedback on the educator's ability to connect self-disclosures to multicultural and social justice content by commenting on the percentage of questions educators answer across each of the three types of educator responses (outlined in *Ask Me!* Step 6).

Fourth, we engage in reflective practice regarding our teaching. We reflect on what occurred during facilitation of the activity. We ask ourselves the following questions: (a) Were we open and authentic during the activity? (b) Did we intentionally not disclose something and for what reason? (c) How can we improve the activity? Also, we keep and review all questions not answered in class so we can answer them for ourselves. This process helps us reflect on potential ways to share our experiences that facilitate student learning. Moreover, we use the questions to reflect on our own cultural blind spots and areas for growth.

ASSESSMENT METHODS USED IN TEACHING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY TO ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

Ask Me! is an instructional activity with three student learning outcomes (SLO):

1. Students will become aware of their educator's professional and personal experiences related to multicultural and social justice.
2. Students will begin to identify how individual and contextual factors can influence diverse cultural viewpoints.
3. Students should reflect on their intersectional cultural identities, related knowledge, and biases.

For SLO 1, we assess the level of class engagement immediately following the activity by reflecting upon the following questions: Did everyone ask a question? Did we have more questions than students? Did students ask follow-up questions publicly in the classroom after hearing the educators' response? Are the questions relevant to the multicultural and social justice subject-matter being discussed? For the SLO 2, group discussion (see *Ask Me!* Step 14) is used to evaluate if students (a) articulate lessons learned that are in-line with the activity purpose, (b) state concerns regarding exploring their cultural identities, (c) identify supports needed from the instructor to facilitate their engagement in the learning process, (d) identify supports needed from the peers to facilitate their engagement in the learning process, and (e) articulate additional lessons learned. For SLO 3, we use a reflection journal assignment to assess if students are identifying their intersectional cultural identities, thinking about cultural knowledge connected to those identity experiences, and identifying cultural perspectives (i.e., biases) through which they make sense of the world. We tend to embed *Ask Me!* within a course that requires weekly student journaling. This allows us to encourage student reflective practice while also creating a space for direct educator-student communication regarding

cultural development. Our feedback on student journals includes educator generated questions that students must answer in their next journal to which educators can respond. This dialogue moves away from the anonymity of *Ask Me!*, as it promotes student accountability for critical self-reflection that lends itself to personal and professional growth (Baquet & Hill, 2022; Melamed et al., 2020).

Implications

Relational teaching strategies in counselor training are emerging in literature (Dorn Medeiros et al., 2020; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Jones & Branco, 2020; Lertora et al., 2020; Tarshis & Baird, 2021). Through self-disclosure, counselor educators are utilizing themselves, their experiences, and their ability to develop relationships with students as tools to increase student engagement and commitment to multiculturalism and social justice. Constructivist theoretical foundations, such as Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality Theory, and Multicultural Orientation (MCO), rely upon the use of self-disclosure, processing of dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and marginalization, and the collaborative student-instructor relationship to construct meaning together towards MSJCC and action (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Jones & Branco, 2020; Lertora et al., 2020; Tarshis & Baird, 2021). Implications for counselor educators utilizing constructivist pedagogical frameworks includes the importance of assessment and understanding that students are arriving at differing points in their personal and professional development. Based upon assessments of student stage of development and readiness for multicultural competency and social justice, educators may determine students' potential receptivity to self-disclosure, including use of the *Ask Me!* activity (Killian, 2017). Educators could implement the *Ask Me!* activity early in the semester to promote authentic discussions and questions and to process those authentic standpoints. Educators might then consider providing content learning regarding the history of privilege, power, oppression, and marginalization to encourage multicultural and social justice competency and action. Counselor educators might also opt to deliver some content regarding multicultural and social justice competency to support safety for all students before conducting the *Ask Me!* activity.

Counselor educators must attend to the safety of all students when using self-disclosure. Specifically, when conducting *Ask Me!*, educators must be prepared to navigate anonymous questions in a manner that is both conducive to learning and considerate of shared and differential experiences amongst students. A limitation of educator disclosure and *Ask Me!* is the unpredictability of student responses to specific instructor self-disclosures. Students could be fearful to share their opinions and disclose their socio-political worldviews in the future after hearing about their educator's worldview, especially if those worldviews are perceived to be oppositional. Educators should publicly name this as a potential student concern while expressing their openness to students' multicultural development. In considering the safety of

all students, educators may need to refrain from responding to some questions or should be strategic in their responses. Educators should anticipate that students have questions about their cultural identities and the cultural groups of which they are members. Student questions may be rooted in heterosexist, racist, sexist, xenophobic, or other biased perspectives. Educators should allow these questions, as they may reflect student socializations that must be explored during training. Moreover, students may ask questions they have always wanted to know but never had the opportunity or courage to ask. However, educators must attend to the overall safety within the classroom environment (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). Student perceptions of peer questions as offensive may contribute to unsafe feelings and disengagement (Seward, 2014). To promote inclusivity for all students, educators must maintain a difficult balance between engaging students with socio-political worldviews that may conflict with professional counseling values of nondiscrimination while ensuring their classrooms are anti-racist and anti-oppressive learning spaces. Counselor educators can disclose their feelings that a question was offensive and provide reasons why. Doing so provides the question asker with information and may give voice to concerns other students may have about the offensiveness of the question. Minoritized students look to their instructors to stand up and address oppression. Successful navigation of oppression in the classroom can promote a sense of belonging for marginalized students and a sense of responsibility for nonmarginalized students.

Future directions for practice could include the engagement of multiple instructors in the classroom when *Ask Me!* is being implemented. One instructor could serve as the person who self-discloses and answers questions, while the other attends to group processes and offers support to students who may have difficulties during the activity. The second instructor could also support the first in the decision-making process surrounding what and how to share about themselves as well as how to respond to various questions using the three responses (direct, personal reaction, and/or historical). Additionally, the activity could incorporate breaks of time between the instructor self-disclosure, submission of anonymous questions, and responses to anonymous questions. That period could be long enough for the instructor and students to prepare sufficiently.

Future research is needed to explore the direct impact of educator multicultural and social justice self-disclosure on student development of cultural competencies and professional dispositions. Researchers are encouraged to use validated measures of educator self-disclosure effectiveness such as the Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale (Cayanus & Martin, 2008) or develop new instruments. Administering direct assessments with counseling students could determine if there are significant relationships between instructor self-disclosure, student responsiveness to disclosures, and student development of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies. Future research could also include empirical investigation of *Ask Me!* A qualitative study in which student questions are collected, categorized, and evaluated for themes that might inform multicultural and social justice training. Additionally, researchers could explore the experiences that instructors of diverse social-cultural backgrounds have in implementing *Ask me!* Moreover, researchers could examine how specific cultural identity representations between educators and students could inform decision making about appropriateness of fit for the activity.

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