

Find the Words: Helping Students Develop Better Clinical Skills

Katherine Shear, Marion E. Kenworthy Professor of Psychiatry in Social Work, Kristin Garay, Matthea Marquart, School of Social Work

The Course:

Introduction to Grief Therapy:

- 3-credit, 14-week course; Fall 2018; 19 students; synchronous online course
- Elective course for Master's of Science in Social Work students in the Advanced Clinical Social Work Practice method area

The challenge:

Teaching students clinical skills in a classroom setting:

- Lecture, readings, discussions, and guest speakers do not sufficiently prepare students to competently interact with clients
- Peer role plays include practiced client interaction, but they are time consuming and students are typically unable to portray realistic clients
- Students come to the course with a wide range of comfort levels with the course content, and a wide range of prior academic and practice experience

The Course Redesign

Original hypothesis: Students need examples of realistic role plays of clinical interactions, for a variety of learning exercises

- Created 8 videos of client – clinician interactions: one set of 4 with an experienced social worker, one set of 4 with a recent graduate
- Students watched, discussed, analyzed, reflected on these role plays and then produced their own role play of the skills
- Result: Role plays were difficult and awkward; many students felt uncomfortable with them

Revised hypothesis mid-semester: Students need practice with realistic clients, multiple brief interventions and immediate feedback & coaching

Created “Find the Words” activity: Repurposed the videos to help students “Find the Words” to work with clients

Result: The “Find the Words” activity gave the students simulated experience with realistic clients and allowed for rapid identification of the coaching support students needed from the instructor. With this coaching, students’ progress developing clinical skills was noticeable.

Introduction to “Find the Words”

How it works:

1. Instructor uses a video illustrating a clinical skill and provides background information regarding the video scenario with a client & clinician
2. Students volunteer to practice the skill as a fishbowl activity in front of the class. The instructor plays a short segment of the video, pausing when it's the therapist's turn to speak
3. Student volunteer responds to the recorded client
4. Instructor invites feedback and student self-reflection and guides students to see how to respond skillfully
5. Instructor plays the video so that students see the model scripted therapist response
6. Instructor continues playing the video and pausing when it's the therapist's turn to speak
7. Repeat with other students

What you need:

- Videos with scripted realistic client-clinician interactions
- A clinician skilled in doing evidence-based treatment, who is also an instructor skilled at creating a brave space within the classroom



Other potential uses for “Find the Words”:

- Any clinical setting: Focused practice with particular clinical skills
- Management courses: Practice with a range of management and fundraising conversations
- Professional development workshops: Both of the above

Quote from student course evaluations:

“What was least helpful to me were the role plays. I don't think these should be incorporated into class because not everyone can be an “adequate” bereaved client or therapist. I benefited more from the panel on finding the words.”

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