Becoming Competent to Teach Competence: Learning and Teaching Relational Process

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Abstract: Though never comfortable with the term competency, I reluctantly accepted it as a way to teach *noticing and attending to relational process* (NARP) for couple and family social work practice. Didactic training combined with experiential activities of video-recorded role-play and audio-recorded feedback comprised my strategy. Although this teaching approach seemed successful, I struggled theoretically with competency, and my ideas morphed through ongoing practice, teaching, and research experiences. I eventually concluded that NARP was not a single competency but was best characterized as "ways of being" as a social work practitioner; I consequently worked to become more articulate and transparent in the classroom. Informed by constructivist pedagogy and relational ontology, I use the following reflection to immerse myself in an ongoing dialogue to understand how my own and my students' unique discourses shape NARP.

Keywords: dialogical analysis, family therapy, competence, constructivist pedagogy, experiential learning

I use this reflection to identify what I have learned about noticing process in relational therapy (which, for this reflection, is synonymous with systemic therapy and family therapy), both as a practitioner and educator. *Process* refers to communication patterns between couples or family members: the spoken words combined with body language, emotions, and meaning contained in the utterance (Conwell, 2014; Davis & Piercy, 2007a, 2007b). For example, when a woman becomes frustrated with her partner for not listening to her request to stop a certain behavior, she might say, in a frustrated tone while sitting back in her chair and looking away with her arms folded, "Just do what you want to do!" Her words alone might signal that she's giving her partner free reign to do what he wants. Her tone and body language, however, signal that she is resigned to abandoning the conversation, but she remains resentful due to feeling unheard. When clinicians attune to communication patterns like this one between couples and families in the present moment (i.e., in the counseling room or another setting), I refer to this as noticing process (Peterson, Jones, & Salscheider, 2016). Such processes reveal crucial relationship concerns requiring therapist engagement for successful therapy (Nichols, 2013).

I draw from dialogical analysis to inform this reflection, which combines discourse and narrative approaches to understand human phenomena (Sullivan, 2012). I have recently used this qualitative analytic tool to make sense of discourses informing the emergence of student competencies for *noticing and attending to relational process* (NARP) after they conduct video-recorded role-play exercises and receive audio-recorded feedback (Peterson, Murphy, & Grandt, 2018). Dialogical analysis employs genre, discourse, and rhetorical features of language. I reduce this reflection to emphasize discourse, which "consists of a multiplicity of speaking voices that express and respond to value judgments in their articulation of a point of view" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 44). Throughout this narrative, I will use this definition to reference "voices" and "discourse" that shape my viewpoint and my students' viewpoints about NARP. I am also informed in this narrative by the constructivist pedagogical principle of meaning-making

(Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). I aim to illustrate how my students and I make sense of student peer role-play experiences combined with my audio feedback. While this emphasis could focus on several different principles of relational therapy, I focus on noticing process. To preface this meaning-making journey, I start with an experience as a therapist that catalyzed my devotion to this topic.

The experience was seven years ago. I was in my second semester of full-time teaching in our MSW program, and I was a part-time practicing therapist. I was in a session with a mother and her two adult children, the oldest a daughter and the younger a son. I was overcome with judgment toward the son for his seeming lack of empathy toward his mother, who was expressing anxiety related to a recent family event. This voice of judgment was in competition with another one to be neutral. These two voices became my inner dialogue during the session. At the end of the hour, the oldest daughter encouraged her younger brother to back off from his expectations of their mother. I quickly supported the oldest daughter, allowing the discourse to be shaped by my judgment. "I agree!" I said.

The family did not return to therapy. Though I never discovered the reason, I am inclined to believe that creating a potential split alliance (Escudero, Boogmans, Loots, & Friedlander, 2012) by agreeing with the oldest daughter may have been the cause. Immediately after the session, I knew I had stumbled, and I began critically reflecting on it. Despite my belief of wrongdoing, I struggled to identify a potential corrective course of future action. The session pervaded my thoughts for several days until I had an epiphany. *If I would have more subtly pointed out to the son the anxiety his mother was experiencing in session and helped his mother to continue to articulate her anxious experience to the son, then*--pause and think--*Oh! THAT'S what it means to notice process!* I began a transformative learning experience, which shaped a new discourse about relational therapy.

Though I had practiced therapy for eight years prior to this event, it wasn't until then that I understood what it meant to notice process in session. Some may be surprised that I felt no shame in my epiphany. I had heard of noticing process prior to this incident, but I was clueless as to its meaning. I found it abstract and poorly described. Discourses about this topic vaguely reference process versus content (Nichols, 2013), or perhaps negative interaction cycles (Johnson, 2008). There is far too little reference to concrete transactions between practitioners and clients; although, this is gradually changing (Escudero et al., 2012; Heiden-Rootes, Jones, Reddick, Jankowksi, & Maxwell, 2015). I knew something had to change. I had been in practice for several years. I had taken two classes on family and couple treatment in my MSW program. I had even been teaching classes on family and couple treatment, and, yet, I was just beginning to understand noticing process. My struggle compelled me to further action. I knew as an instructor, I needed to help students understand this phenomenon much sooner than I did.

From Skill to Competency

In conjunction with this therapy encounter, I pondered more deliberately my class structure. I had already been teaching students "skills for not knowing" (DeJong & Berg, 2008), which assist practitioners in assuming a posture of wanting to understand rather than judging clients'

experiences. I knew how to help students affirm client perceptions and normalize client experience. I also knew how to help them ask relationship questions, which are used to work systemically with clients. Feeling mission-bound to teach students how to notice process, I persisted in refining my practice as a systemic therapist. I became intent on noticing processes unfold in sessions and making them transparent to the couples and families with whom I was working.

While more intentionally noticing processes in therapy and thinking more deliberately about what my students were learning, I began making needed class structure changes. Several discourses informed my efforts. I considered student suggestions for class improvement, encounters with faculty peers, my ongoing practice experience, my research of student experiences of gaining competency (Peterson, 2014; Peterson et al., 2016), and my engagement with literature on constructivist teaching strategies (Jonassen et al., 2003; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). Additionally, because of my belief in the value of peer role-play, experiential activities for teaching systemic therapy remained my dominant discourse (Helmeke & Prouty, 2001; Kane, 1996). Attending to these discourses emboldened me to reexamine my use of lecture. I produced online lecture videos, allotting more time for viewing and discussing professional videos in class. Other content changes I enacted included a textbook (Williams, Edwards, Patterson, & Chamow, 2011) to add more systemic concepts to the skills for not knowing from DeJong and Berg (2008), and the inclusion of two theories: Gottman and Gottman's (2008) method and emotionally-focused couple therapy (EFCT) (Johnson, 2008). I developed other experiential activities to help students understand assessment and their own and their classmates' diversities that shaped their unique practice identities. In one activity, for example, I have students watch a segment of the movie, *Marvin's Room*. Thereafter, they assess the family system in small groups, after which we discuss their assessment.

Simultaneously, I concluded that noticing process was too vague a term to capture nuances associated with systemic therapy. Though cumbersome, I ultimately decided that NARP was clearer (Peterson et al., 2016). It fits more comfortably with the prominent discourses in my professional development, specifically my constructivist stance (Peterson et al., 2018) and my holistic interpretation of practitioner development that corresponds with practice wisdom (Fowers, 2003). This semantic change animates the noticing process, thus providing clearer direction for students by identifying two overlapping but distinct parts of process. The first is *noticing relational* processes, which include communication patterns (see above definition) that emerge between at least two related or romantic individuals (Davis & Piercy, 2007a, 2007b). The second is *attending to* those processes by helping families and couples recognize and change these patterns as necessary.

I came to strongly emphasize NARP as a critical systemic skill. However, my inner dialogue, or microdialogue (Sullivan, 2012), challenged this conceptualization. The word skill has a technical connotation that can delegitimize the ethical nature of therapy (Fowers, 2003). Moreover, Education and Policy Standards of the Council on Social Work Education suggest strongly that competence is not just enacting skills but applying knowledge and values with purpose and intention (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 6). International literature supports this more holistic definition of competence (Barak, 2017; Benade, 2014; Khaled,

Gulikers, Biemans, van der Wel, & Mulder, 2014; Khaled, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2016).

Still trying to piece together how I was engaging in conversation with students about competency development, I began recognizing my own inflexible voice on pedagogy. I felt somehow constrained to be *only* constructivist. This quandary became apparent during my engagement with doctoral students in another course I teach. Reading their accounts of their teaching style, I realized I had epistemological room to embrace other activities I was conducting in class. Ultimately, my emerging discourse on pedagogy for teaching systemic therapy now relies on elements of post-positivist *and* constructivist pedagogy. Assumed in an objectivist, post-positivist framework (Bellefeuille, 2006) is the existence of universal competencies necessary for NARP. Assumed in the constructivist framework is the need for learning activities that assist students in creating shared meaning and engaging in critical reflection (Fire & Casstevens, 2013; Jonassen et al., 2003; Jonassen et al., 1999). I could embrace both, given that each had something to offer the ongoing struggle of my own and my students' competency development.

Another voice challenging my conceptualization of NARP emerged through scholarship. I collected and analyzed data through unstructured interviews on the experience of students developing "skill" for NARP through role-play assignments. While engaged in data analysis, I felt compelled to follow Wengraf's (2001) advice to carefully craft a conceptual framework to account for the students' learning process. Through my engagement with these discourses, I recognized the inadequacy of emphasizing NARP as a *competency* or a *skill*. Several competencies were needed for NARP. Moreover, while analyzing interviews, I realized that students' moment-by-moment decisions in role-plays were organized by several discourses. While some discourses were from my class or previous classes, others were from students' personal and professional experiences and the information and interactions from their classmates acting as clients. My conclusion is exemplified in the following example.

Instructor and Practitioner Examples

A student acting as a therapist is conducting an initial interview with student peers acting as a married couple, Shane and Jennifer. They are a young, religious, and financially stable couple with three young children at home (ages five and three, and a newborn). Shane and Jennifer have come in due to Shane's struggle with pornography and Jennifer's struggle with postpartum depression, both of which are affecting their relationship negatively. At one point, the therapist is given an opportunity to affirm Shane's perceptions: he is visibly upset (heightened affect and raised voice tone) about his wife's inability to engage in emotional and physical intimacy. Even while being upset, however, Shane states that he needs Jennifer. This statement creates an opportunity for the therapist to affirm Shane's perceptions and help him express his emotions in a way that is more digestible to Jennifer. The therapist misses this opportunity, which I note in my audio feedback.

Although the student acting as therapist recognizes the missed opportunity, she explains that Shane's heightened affect made it difficult for her to affirm his perceptions. She further explains that giving him any kind of affirmation could get him more upset. If he gets more upset, he could

leave the session and take it out on Jennifer or the kids at home. She reinforces her thoughts on this subject, stating that she has never in her own work seen someone that upset be able to de-escalate. (Remember, this is all from a role-play with this student and two of her peers.)

It is clear that this student is navigating her way through an emerging discourse on NARP: (1) my voice, through audio-recorded feedback as instructor, encouraging her to affirm the client's perceptions and bring a relational focus to the session, (2) her understanding of working with couples, informed by her experience of working with clients who typically struggle with anger issues, and (3) her understanding of the ethical ramifications of potentially exacerbating an already-tense situation. In short, she has *valid* reasons for why she did what she did (or did not do), and the multiple voices informing her practice are in tension with each other about what the right course of action is. No one can blame her for this struggle, as it is informed by her experience and her budding understanding of therapy practice in a relational context. In fact, it is similar to the same struggle I have, illustrated in the following example from my practice, with altered details to protect confidentiality.

During a couple's session, a husband remarks to his wife that their ongoing discussion of their relationship makes him want to leave the situation (not permanently, but for a two- to three-day break). In turn, the wife's anxiety escalates as she senses possible abandonment by her husband. His intention was to give himself space from her, but his threat to leave for a brief period of time has, in fact, escalated her anxiety, making her want to discuss the relationship even more. Do I turn to the husband and help him understand that his words had the opposite effect on what he wanted to see change? Do I help the wife understand how her own anxiety is getting in the way of receiving what she wants most, namely emotional connection with her husband? Or do I help both of them see that their anger is increasing as the conversation continues and invite them to reflect on each of their individual contributions to the increased anger? None of these questions has an easy answer, but they speak to discourse related to NARP. Acting competently in situations as the one described will be influenced by what I carefully *notice* and *attend* to. I need to *notice* the relationship needs (Conwell, 2014; Davis & Piercy, 2007a, 2007b; Heatherington, Friedlander, Diamond, Escudero, & Pinsof, 2015). Then, I must draw upon my best understanding of relationship science, reflect upon ethical practice, and attend to the *relational process* and unique personality features of each dyad member.

Engaging with Students in Their Learning and Moving Forward

In yet another transformational learning experience, manifested in the aforementioned examples, I realized NARP requires several competencies, including a deepening understanding of ethical practice. Students come with a complex array of voices informing their competency development for NARP (Peterson et al., 2018). Video-recorded role-play and audio-recorded feedback are a beginning dialogue between me and the student. This dialogue continues to take shape throughout the semester in other readings, exercises, and assignments, including a large group role-play at the end of the semester.

To illustrate, I further elaborate on the practice of providing audio-recorded feedback for role-plays conducted by students. The feedback I provide consists of my general observations

and play-by-play observations for each individual student. While watching the role-play, I take notes for the play-by-play portion, which requires me to pause the recording several times. I emphasize specific skills cited in DeJong and Berg (2008), such as summarizing, affirming perceptions, and skills related to noticing relational process. Citing specific skills is one way I attempt to generate shared meaning between me and the students. Once I have viewed the recorded role-play and carefully looked at my notes, I identify themes for general feedback. I then start recording. I begin with the themes of general feedback to help students take notice of their strengths and areas to consider for further refinement. I share one brief example from our qualitative study to illustrate (Peterson et al., 2018).

In a role-play scenario, a student was a therapist for a 16-year-old African American pregnant female, Gabrielle, and her maternal grandmother, Eva. Gabrielle wanted to give up the baby for adoption, and Eva was adamant about keeping the child in their home, which is what prompted therapy. While providing some general observations to the student, I stated: "You do a really nice job of trying to harness the strength of a relationship through noticing relational process." Then, before jumping into play-by-play feedback, I stated, "I'm confident that with the suggestions I give, you would be just fine with this dyad." Of course, such a compliment has to be done authentically. For example, if in my judgment the student really struggled to connect with the dyad, I would use the general feedback to identify something else the student did well, such as asking open-ended questions. After identifying strengths, I might suggest the student carefully assess the relationship he/she had with the clients in the session. Ultimately, I hope my suggestions promote the habit of critical self-reflection, which students need for their ongoing development.

Returning to the role-play example, Eva had talked about the importance of keeping the family together, while Gabrielle talked about her own lack of preparedness for caring for a child. Eva insisted that she could help, which prompted Gabrielle to express concern about Eva's back problems. After this exchange between Eva and Gabrielle, the student affirms the perceptions of Gabrielle by stating something close to the following, "Gabrielle, what I hear you saying is you're concerned for your grandmother's health because of all the lifting and all the tasks it takes to lift a young child." In my instructor role providing the audio feedback, I complimented the student on affirming Gabrielle's perceptions. I then suggested that the student could more specifically *notice* the emotion of Gabrielle (i.e., genuine concern for Eva's back problems) and *attend* to that emotion by identifying its function in the relationship. Regarding the latter, I could suggest the practitioner (student) say something like, "Gabrielle, as I hear you talking about grandma's [Eva's] back problems, I can tell that this is really concerning to you."

This subtle difference in language is what I aim to have students understand. Such a statement takes what Gabrielle said and identifies its specific relationship function; in this case, it is her concern for her grandmother. Students can learn through this process the empathy-enhancing and tension-reducing impact NARP can have in practice with families and couples. However, if I were to go back and provide feedback, I would have also suggested that the student make this process more transparent for Eva by asking something like, "Eva, what is it like for you to hear this concern from Gabrielle?" Moreover, as with any teaching moment, there are relationships as well between the instructor and students. When I asked the student in an interview about what it

was like for her to receive this feedback, she was self-deprecating about this missed opportunity. I learned through this experience that I have to account as well for the critical voices that emerge in students as a consequence of receiving feedback. Therefore, I have to provide the best balance possible between identifying strengths and areas of growth for students.

While I am trying to achieve this balance, it is important to emphasize that student interviews affirm my practice of formative rather than summative feedback about the role-play experience. I realize that my audio-recorded feedback must honor the unique discourses students experience for developing effective practice and ethical standards during role-play practice experiences. Thus, I seek to use video-recorded role-play and audio-recorded feedback to inspire critical reflection, as promoted by Bay and Macfarlane's (2011, p. 747) interpretation of Fook's description of,

> the creation of a climate, or culture, of critical acceptance, in which one's position, interpretation and practice are deconstructed non-judgmentally, in order to find out "why," rather than approve or disapprove actions. In this sense, the truth of one's narrative is not questioned; however, by opening it to interrogation, other possibilities can be revealed and considered, as students come to understand the story of their "lived experience" and explore the "why's" of their thinking and actions.

My approach employs several important principles of critical reflection as noted by Fook and Askeland (2007). It challenges objectivist assumptions about what is right and wrong in practice, as well as regulation-based cultures that require standards of practice. Such standards infuse anxiety into practitioners who fail to meet them (Fook & Askeland, 2007, pp. 523-526). Audio-recorded feedback is created in such a way to validate student strengths and gently challenge them to consider other options in certain situations. Even then, I have to realize they have valid reasons for accepting or rejecting my feedback.

Implications and Summary

Despite substantial growth as an instructor of clinical practice with families and couples, other discourses on competency development continue to compete for my attention. My case vignettes address poverty, oppression, and other crucial concepts for social work practice. Still, I can more deliberately employ critical theory to strengthen consciousness awareness in students (Suárez, Newman, & Reed, 2008). Social and cultural discourses of our day, including LGBTQ rights, race, privilege, immigration, feminism, the place of faith in practice, and others represent conversations in which my students should be immersed. They can learn to approach these issues from the same non-judgmental posture employed to help them understand their practice experiences. In this way, they learn compassion for themselves and others while trying to make sense of some of the most complex and charged issues of our time. Moreover, these discourses are important because they manifest themselves in several studies regarding the health and mental health of families and couples (e.g., Logie, 2012). Ultimately, this type of experiential activity is fertile ground for students to learn about the varied experiences of clients. Instructors can base vignettes either on real practice experiences (with modifications to protect confidentiality) or on other real stories that exemplify the struggles related to today's social and

cultural discourses.

Another discourse competing for my attention is competency development that applies to several types of social work settings requiring attention to systems. My teaching has primarily focused on therapy practice with family systems. Social workers populate hospitals, hospice agencies, schools, and many other settings in which traditional therapy may not be feasible. Their practice also frequently includes families. Is NARP only for therapy encounters, or could practitioners benefit from employing this principle in several different types of encounters involving families? My belief is in the latter, which summons the need for ongoing research.

Such research could explore how social workers in varied social work settings include or exclude relational others (i.e., families and couples) in services. This examination should not be limited to interviews with practitioners or clients; rather, supervisors and administrators should also be involved. It is crucial to understand how agency policies and practices may support or thwart efforts to serve families. Focus groups, individual interviews, and ethnographic strategies (Longhofer, Floersch, & Hoy, 2013) could be used in tandem to understand how the delivery of services includes families. Should a need be recognized to more deliberately include families in services, ongoing research and social work practice development could target this aim.

Quantitative research could be used as an adjunct to this agenda. If agencies implemented practices of greater family inclusion, believing that these practices would improve service provision, pre- and post-tests could be used to determine if clients improve on expected outcomes. For example, one would expect mental health symptom improvement with greater family involvement for those receiving assertive community treatment (ACT) services. This research could also include careful and intensive program evaluation in an effort to identify and strengthen agency systems and policies that encourage greater family inclusion.

Concluding this narrative, I have come to believe my teaching must encompass the following: 1) improving my own competence in NARP in practice, 2) improving my competence in teaching competence in NARP, and 3) attending to my own relational process with students. This latter point has become increasingly poignant in the context of the data my fellow researchers and I analyzed. I believe continuing to develop these three practices will lead to the desired result of students developing competency in their service to couples and families.

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