Experiential Learning in Addiction Education

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Overview of Workshop

By the end of this workshop you will:

• Understand the purpose and benefit of experiential learning

• Its application to undergraduate addiction education

• Specific experiential activities that can be incorporated into your courses

• Hear from students how these techniques have enhanced their addiction education experience.
Introduction of Presenter
What are some common stereotypes or initial impressions our students may have of the addiction population?
What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is an approach to learning that focuses on learning through EXPERIENCE.

This approach to learning is more specifically defined by LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION AND DOING.

This style of learning is different from didactic learning where the learner is playing a comparatively passive role.
Why Experiential Learning in Addiction Education?

• Many of our students are entering the practitioner field with little personal experience or empathy for the addiction population.

• This lack of empathy and understanding of the population has the ability to increase stereotypes and reduce the professional’s ability to display empathy, unconditional positive regard and utilize other vital skills when working with these populations.

• Going beyond disseminating information about addiction practice and building experiential learning into our teaching enhances the overall learning experience for students.
Overview of Interventions

• The information presented is part of an IRB approved study focused on empathy development in addiction education for undergraduate human service students.

• The experiential learning techniques were implemented within two sections of an undergraduate human service course focused on introducing students to substance use and addiction.

• 100 students all together participated in the interventions as a requirement for the courses; 40 students provided consent to have their information included in the study.
First Course:
Introduction to Substance Abuse
Prior to Engaging In Experiential Learning

One the first day of the course, students were asked to reflect and write down the first thing that came to mind when asked the following questions:

- Describe an Addict?
- Why do people use drugs or alcohol?
- If you were at an event and found out that someone had a drug history what would you do?
- What should society do with people who are actively using drugs and/or abusing alcohol?
Student Responses:

Question 1:

• “Someone who is dirty, messy hair, maybe homeless; falling down all the time begging for change.”

• “Someone smelly who can’t hold down a job, they are not to be trusted and are like the low life’s of society.”

Question 2:

• “They do not care about the people they hurt; they are weak minded and can stop whenever they want to but they choose to keep using.”

• “they do not care about their family. They are selfish and put drugs before everything else.”
Student Responses:

**Question 3:**
- “I would hide my purse because they may steal from me.”
- “I would not speak to them anymore, I would feel really uncomfortable around them because they are sketchy.”

**Question 4:**
- “Put them in jail if they are stealing; it’s their own problem not society’s”
- “I don’t know, I guess just let them figure out their life.”
Overview of Experiential Learning Tools

• All students in the course participated in a **30 day abstinence project**

• All students participated in **three hypothetical group treatment sessions** with the instructor as the facilitator of the group.

• All students were required to attend **three community based support groups**: two targeted toward the client and one targeted toward family members.

• Students were given opportunities **to reflect on their experience** via live in class discussions as well as via two writing opportunities.
Experiential Technique: Abstinence Project

In order to gain experience with the recovery process, students were asked to abstain from a behavior or substance of choice for **a period of 30 days**.

**Common choices included but were not limited to the following:**

A. Junk food, texting while driving, unhealthy relationships, television, fast food, profanity.

B. Alcohol, nicotine, social media, caffeine, unhealthy relationships

*Students were required to maintain a daily record of their days of sobriety throughout this 30 day period.*
Experiential Learning Outcome: Abstinence Project

- Students gained experiential understanding of cravings, urges, and binges.
- Experience with guilt, shame, and self-doubt associated with relapse.
- Better conceptualization of identifying triggers for relapse and lifestyle changes.
- The role people, places, and things play in sobriety.
Experiential Technique: Simulated Group Treatment

Throughout the course of their 30 days of abstinence, students were required to attend 3 in class group sessions facilitated the instructor.

Prior to each group sessions, students were asked to complete a “check in” which consisted of them reporting the following:

A. Their days of sobriety
B. Their feelings on the date of the session and since beginning their sobriety
C. Any good news they would like to share.

Each of the group sessions utilized an interactional approach to group treatment and presented open discussion topics which ranged from lifestyle adjustments, cravings, urges, relapse triggers, guilt and shame etc.
Experiential Learning Outcome: Simulated Group Treatment

Students gained experience with understanding group treatment from the perspective of clients.

Students were able to reflect on their experiential learning with peers.

Students gained experiences in group dynamic development.

The role of peer support in client recovery as many students reported reinitiating sobriety after relapse.

They also gained experience with vulnerability, self awareness and disclosure that practitioners often overlook with clients.
Experiential Technique: Community Based Support Group Attendance

• Throughout the course, students were required to attend **three community based support groups**:

• Two of the groups had to **target the person in recovery** (e.g. Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous etc)

• One of the groups had to **target the family of the person in recovery** (e.g. Nar-Anon or Al-Anon)

**Important:**

- **Proof of their attendance** via signature sheets
- Instructor facilitated didactic lecture on CBSG to prepare students.
- Reflection was done using **live and written means.**
Experiential Learning Outcome: Community Based Support Group

- Students were able to **challenge their stereotypes** about the addiction population.
- Interacting with those in recovery **reduced anxiety, fears, and apprehension**.
- **Empathy and understanding** of the addiction population were increased.

Family meetings provided opportunities for students to **see the impact of addiction on the family**.

Reflecting on this experience enhanced their learning and understanding of this experience.
Students Were Asked The Same Questions at the End of the Course.....
Student Responses:

Question 1:

• “Someone who has gotten into a rough spot in their life. There is still hope for them but they have to want it for themselves.”

• “Someone who probably experienced something bad in their life and because they couldn’t cope or didn’t have proper resources became an addict.”

• “An addict can be anyone.”

Question 2:

• “Sometimes it’s the only way out of a bad situation life abuse, trauma or loss.”

• “There isn’t one answer, you have to ask that person because everyone’s experience is different.”
Student Responses:

Question 3:
• “I would encourage them to stay in recovery because it can be difficult.”
• “I wouldn’t say anything not unless they wanted me to know; I would be accommodating though by not having alcohol at a party if they were coming to try to help them out but not embarrass them.”

Question 4:
• “Try to give them as many resources as possible. The meetings showed me how much they struggle to keep their sobriety and do normal things that we take for granted.”
• “Give them support if they are willing to take it. They are fighting a hard battle every day.”
Second Course:
Substance Abuse Treatment and Research
Overview of Experiential Activities

Students in this course, enhance their learning from the initial addiction course. This course focused on their practitioner identity through the following experiential activities:

1. Live experience administering urine drug screens and BAC

2. Role playing the following SA counselor tasks
   - Reviewing UDS results with clients
   - Getting informed consent
   - Discharging a client successfully and unsuccessfully
   - Revive training

3. Practicing diagnosing use the DSM-5 and live scenarios
Questions?
THANK YOU!

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