The Constructive-Developmental Internship Seminar: A Hothouse for Powerful Student Learning

Garrett McAuliffe

Abstract

How students know, not just what they know, is central to professional competence. The constructivist-developmental human services internship seminar can trigger such epistemological development in the direction of constructivist thinking. With that purpose in mind, this article presents ways of assessing students' current ways of knowing, learning goals for the internship seminar, guidelines for developmental instruction, and development-instigating activities.

Introduction

The human services internship has the potential to be the most intense and challenging learning experience in a student’s academic career (Diambra & McClam, 2001; Kiser, 1998; Switzer & McKinney, 1991). Internship is an experience–charged opportunity that can trigger profound shifts in student self-concept and ways of knowing (Switzer & King, 1999). During fieldwork, students experience ambiguous work situations and ethical dilemmas, their ideas are tested in the fire of direct action, and they are forced to think for themselves, often on the spot, without direct guidance or concrete rules. No textbook will give them immediate, explicit directions for deciding on how to manage a complex domestic violence crisis line call or helping a family whose adolescent has run away. Such work calls for a corresponding capacity in the human service worker.

One way of describing that capacity lies in the notion of development. There is a growing body of evidence that developmental growth is important for effective professional behavior (Kegan, 1982; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000; Senge, 1990; Torbert, 1976). For example, Kegan (1994) named the attributes that are consistently mentioned in the professional training literature as being crucial to excellence, mastery, and success at
professional work. He considered these attributes to be developmental achievements:

- to invent one’s own work (rather than to see it as owned and created by one’s employer)
- to be self-initiating, self-correcting, and self-evaluating (rather than dependent on others to frame the problems, initiate adjustments, or determine whether things are going well)
- to be guided by one’s own visions at work (rather than being captive of an authority’s agenda)
- to take responsibility for what happens to oneself at work (rather than seeing one’s circumstances and possibilities as largely caused by others)
- to be masters of one’s particular work roles, jobs, or careers (rather than have an imitating relationship to what one does)

Some empirical studies of professionals have confirmed the relationship between development and professional competence. Mentkowski and Associates (2000) found, in their study of alumni in many professions five years out of college, that competence was most highly related to developmental factors, particularly to one that they called “collaborative organizational thinking and action” and “strong independent conceptualization and action abilities.” These characteristics parallel Kegan’s (1994) notion of a developmental “self-authorizing” capacity, one that he suggests is critical for professional competence.

Rooke and Torbert (1998) have also provided evidence of the development-competence link, in terms of organizational impact of managers’ development. They reported that all managers who were self-amending, who could listen to multiple perspectives, and who promoted non-unilateral power were associated with organizations who had positively transformed their size, profitability, quality, strategy, and reputation during the period of study. That relationship was not the case for managers who were more external and rule bound. While these studies are at best analogous to human services situations, many of the characteristics of an effective human services professional, such as having an internal locus, being open-minded, and being tolerant of ambiguity, are parallel to those named (Neukrug & McAuliffe, 1993; McAuliffe, 2002).

If the qualities of the highly competent practitioner are seen as developmental attributes, then they are also amenable to change, given development-enhancing conditions. There is both anecdotal and empirical evidence that such increases in development are triggered significantly more by internship than by other courses (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Haag-Granell, 2002; Jurgens & Schwitzer, 2002; McClam & Puckett, 1992; Sadow, Ryder, Stein, & Geller, 1987). Such findings make good sense if viewed from the perspective of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). As Switzler (1992) has pointed out, a human services internship is a particularly rich opportunity to cycle the student through all four of the critical learning conditions in Kolb’s (1984) model, namely, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. O’Byrne (2001, p. 185) reiterates the power of the field experience in these words: “A practicum classroom [i.e., internship seminar] is a constructivist laboratory. Students experiment.... They mix theory and practice. And the process can be volatile. ... a ‘chemical reaction’ often emerges....; that is, situations in which the mix of emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions create new dynamics and discoveries. Knowledge breaks through when developing creative solutions…to problems that come from the student’s own current life experience or prior knowledge, rather than through attempts to replicate the work of others.” Such struggle makes the human services internship a “hothouse” for maximizing learning and development.

Despite the potential power of these kinds of occurrences, they are not guaranteed. Experience in internship alone, without reflection, is not the best teacher (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Kiser, 1998), despite the contrary advice of the well-known aphorism. Unexamined experience without reflection can result in mere habit. And the habit-reliant human service worker easily becomes the concrete, rule-bound practitioner who relies on conformity to received authority to deal with the complex decisions of this work. If a major objective of human services education, and of undergraduate education in general, is to produce relatively autonomous, interdependent, and system-aware professionals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000; Morrissette, 1999), then immediate field experience must be complemented by the reflection and dialogue that are inherent in developmentally intentional instruction (Knefelkamp, 1984).

The internship seminar, itself, can be a critical complement to the field experience. It can, like fieldwork, be an intense learning environment, a place where the “heat” for the hothouse effect might be provided. It is my purpose in this article to outline teaching strategies that can expand students’ ways of knowing in internship, particularly through what I will call a “constructive-developmental internship seminar.”

**Constructive Developmental Instruction as a Ground for Learning in Internship**

The notion of “constructive development” comes from the educational traditions most commonly associated with Piaget (1971) and Kohlberg (1981). “Construction” refers to the human act of making meaning of experience and “development” refers to the evolution of this meaning-making capacity. Following Kegan (1982), I will use the term constructive
development as an inclusive notion, one that represents all of the theories of cognitive or ego development, since all are fundamentally concerned with meaning construction (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). In simple, general terms, these theories chart adults’ potential epistemological evolution from a person’s general reliance on external authority for receiving knowledge through greater internality and autonomy, and, finally, to dialectical thinking and openness to the limits of one’s current meaning making.

A constructive-developmentally-oriented human services education would be especially concerned with “how” future human service workers know, at least as much as “what” they know. In intentional constructive-developmental education, instructors and field supervisors instigate student development toward expanded ways of knowing, or constructing. The developmental method can be captured in the dual notions of “challenge” (or “mismatch”) to a current way of knowing and “support” (or “match”) for that way of knowing (Sanford, 1962).

Developmental instruction has been explicitly described in the work of Kohlberg (e.g., Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Knefelkamp, 1984; and Spinthall & Thies-Spinthall, 1983). In each of these models, the teaching process itself is an equal partner with course content. Students’ ways of knowing are challenged by their being asked to participate in knowledge creation through their experience of dilemmas that have no clear technical solution. The hoped for result of developmental instruction is more expanded personal epistemologies for students. The internship seminar can be a place in which such developmental instruction is implemented. It can be rife with dilemmas, decisions, multiple perspectives, and demands for evidence.

Human Services Students’ Ways of Student Knowing

My colleagues and I (Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997; Lovell & Nunnery, 2002) have identified four ways of student knowing that might capture the range of human services students’ epistemologies. These four are analogous to many of the stages of developmental theories (e.g., Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). They might function as markers of students’ readiness for constructivist thinking. It should be noted that such types are only approximations. They serve descriptive purposes, as individuals are not so clearly “in” a particular stage across all situations, nor are these stages limited to four. Rather than think of the types as hard and “real” categories, it is better to recognize the “amoeba-like” (Creamer, 1990) character of particular ways of knowing, the forays and retreats that individuals make from their dominant constructive tendency. The ways of knowing are also not limited to the following four distinct stages, as knowing is likely represented by a continuous spectrum of tendencies (Kegan, 1982). With these provisos in mind, Lovell and I (1997) have described two broad groupings of non-constructivist and constructivist knowing in students, which are further divided into four sub-groupings of “types” of students. Our recent research (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2003) has confirmed many of these characteristics for the two groupings.

I. Non-Constructivist:

- Authority-Constructing Students, or those characterized by “dualism” in Perry’s (1970) terms and “received knowing” in the language of Belenky et al. (1986), are those who have absolute adherence to received “rules” for human services practice. In turn, they often transfer rule-adherence into directiveness and even authoritarian tendencies, unless the authority “directs” them to be client-centered.

- Subjective-Construction Students, or “multiplistic” in Perry’s (1970) terms, are adherent to an evidence-less relativism. Subjectivism is rampant—with “That’s my opinion” being the regnant phrase. They feel unable to justify human services interventions, as everything seems equally valid. Instead, they rely on automatic “impulses” to act.

II. Constructivist:

- Autonomy-Constructing Students, or “self-authorizing,” in Kegan’s (1994) language. These “beginning constructivists” recognize the need for seeking evidence for human services actions and decisions. They can explain reasons for their interventions, based at least partially on “independent” analysis of situations and needs.

- Dialectical-Constructing Students, or “constructed knowing” in the terms of Belenky et al. (1986). These “full constructivists” honor the ultimate uncertainty in human services practice, but nevertheless make commitments to action, however temporary. They embrace new experience through consultation, inner dialogue, and new actions.

There is evidence that constructivist knowing is required for effective professional work, as this epistemology is characterized by situational flexibility, weighing of evidence to make decisions, and creative solutions to problems (Kegan, 1982; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000; Senge, 1990; Torbert, 1976). Such thinking, however, is not likely to be characteristic of the majority of human services students. One study of human services students revealed that the strong majority (70%) at one institution were subjectivist constructors, that is, wavering between concrete reliance on external authority and recognition of their own power to create knowledge.
Neukrug & McAuliffe, 1993). That is, most were non-constructivist but ready for transition. They were still heavily reliant on outside authority and cultural norms for most behavior and dependent on “rules” for professional decision making. However, at the same time they were beginning to challenge the ultimate value of such norms as guides for behavior. An intentional human services education might utilize this “readiness,” that is, the wavering between conformity and self-authorization to instigate beginning constructivist thinking.

These findings and the four epistemological “types” then offer framework for human service educators’ understanding of how their students might think as they arrive to the internship seminar. In instructional practice, instructors can first assess students’ development, and then teach toward their diverse readiness.

**Goals for the Constructivist-Developmental Internship Seminar**

My colleague and I (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2003) have discovered characteristics of constructivist thinkers by examining low stage and high stage student performance in helping interviews. We found the following five dimensions to characterize constructivist counseling students’ interviews. They might serve as learning goals for the activities of the internship seminar.

- **empathic decenteredness:** The ability to distinguish one’s own point of view from that of the client and that of others in general.
- **perspicacity:** The ability to uncover cross-situational and nonobvious client issues.
- **metacognition:** Interest in and ability to think about one’s thinking, to probe personal meanings and motivations and to consider multiple helping strategies.
- **tolerance for ambiguity:** Recognition that uncertainty is pervasive, that many perspectives are possible, and that pausing for evidence is needed before one draws conclusions.
- **deliberated action:** Interest in and ability to act based on weighing of evidence.

I propose that these five dimensions inform our work in the internship seminar, that is, that we explicitly promote them in that setting through the use of developmental instruction principles through activities, assignments, and discussion.

**Constructive-Developmental Instruction**

Readiness and instruction are partners in developmental instruction. Both must be incorporated into seminar activities. In the area of readiness, we can assume that student ways of knowing, or “constructive capacities,” in Kegan’s (1994) words, vary among undergraduate students (Ferry, 1970). Therefore, a first step in constructive-developmental instruction (hereafter abbreviated as CDI) is to assess such capacity. Such readiness can be determined either via an explicit instrument (e.g., Moore, 1987) or by assuming a likely continuum of non-constructivist to constructivist capacities among human services students. Then a set of guidelines can be selectively applied to enhance development.

**Guidelines for Constructive-Developmental Instruction**

The following ten guidelines have been devised to frame constructive-developmental instruction (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2000; McAuliffe, 2001). They are a means of encouraging constructivist professional practice in human services students.

**Guideline One:** Personalize. Promote interactions among all participants in the learning environment. Make connections between subject matter and students’ personal experiences.

**Guideline Two:** Vary the structure. Provide more direction and even advice in order to support non-constructivists and challenge them and others with more amorphous tasks.

**Guideline Three:** Promote experience. Instigate activity through case study, illustration, role play, interviewing, team projects, and data collection.

**Guideline Four:** Stress multiple perspectives. Ask students to examine each case from several angles.

**Guideline Five:** Encourage metacognition. Model and require reflection on actions and cases. Ask students to monitor their responses to clients – emotional and cognitive, personal and culturally based.

**Guideline Six:** Question categorical thinking. Challenge labels and conclusions. Recognize the fluidity of cultural constructions. Emphasize the “story” of the client over essentialist diagnosis.

**Guideline Seven:** Recognize that some conflict is normal. Engage dialectical thinking. Identify contrasts in ideas and interpersonal tensions.

**Guideline Eight:** Show commitment in the face of doubt. Model action based on deliberation and weighing of evidence.

Guideline Ten: Encourage “metalogue” or interpersonal process awareness. Note the scripts, games, manipulations, power dynamics, and patterns enacted in relationships.

Each of these guidelines can be applied “developmentally,” that is, with student readiness in mind. Their application to the specific seminar setting is described next.

Application to the Constructive-Developmental Internship Seminar

Three particular dimensions of the seminar will be described here. These activities have been intentionally designed to instigate self-authorized, constructivist thinking on the part of student interns. Each activity particularly expresses a number of the previously listed ten guidelines. The emphasis in these activities is on student involvement and action, dialogue among members and with the instructor, and the value of temporarily “not knowing” in order to eventually “know better.”

Participant inclusion in course design. Students can themselves participate in constructing the seminar. Of course, that can be done in any course. The internship seminar, however, is particularly ripe for encouraging student authorship and ownership of class content and process, due to the small numbers in class and the foundation for discussion in actual student experience. The non-constructivist thinkers will be challenged to create structure instead of receiving it from an authority. Instructors can guide the creation of the course, using the “over-the-shoulder” notion (Kegan, 1994) of allowing students to generate ideas while introducing suggestions for content, process, and assignments. It is desirable to have students initially experience the instructor-designed, although participatory, first session, then, at the end of that session, to offer them a “menu” of possible future seminar activities, and ask them to write, between the first two sessions, about their general preferred learning environment and the specific classroom processes that they would prefer. In the second session, the instructor can guide a group discussion about the structuring of the semester long seminar. Instructors can hold certain activities and processes as “sacred,” that is, not for negotiation, such as case presentations and the commentaries that are described below. In mid-semester, a full review of the course process might be conducted, in which the value of each activity is reconsidered and new arrangements are made. CDI guidelines one, two, four, and seven, that is, personalizing, varying the structure, stressing multiple perspectives, and recognizing conflict as the norm, will be enacted through this peer participation in “authoring,” rather than being only a recipient of, learning experiences.

Ongoing commentaries. This dimension of the constructive-developmer internship seminar establishes a means of regular dialogue and feedback between students and the instructor. Using writing as a vehicle for reflecting has been applied to human services education (Morrisette, 1999). As a participant involvement in course design, the seminar is a particularly rich opportunity for such reflection. In the case of written reflective commenta concrete experience in the field (Kolb, 1984) is a rich breeding ground metacognitive intern musings based on dilemmas they face and choice they make. The commentary is a vehicle for “reflection-on-action” (Sch 1983), which is critical for self-correction and evidence-based decision making.

Toward this end, students report their observations, experiences, a needs to the instructor between each class session via an e-mail messa that they send by the morning of that week’s class. Each so-call “commentary” consists of three parts: (1) the student’s views on the conte and process of the previous class session, (2) a description of “fac feelings, and meanings” from the fieldwork experience itself, especially a incidents that seem important, and (3) critical and personalized reflectio on the short complementary readings. The commentaries are a “safe” w for the more silent students to present their voice. In order to trigger stude generated topics for discussion, the instructor can read some of thel commentaries to the class at the beginning of the session, alw anonymously. These public presentations of student experiences are reflections that legitimize non-constructivists’ ideas and therefore contribu to their increasing “self-authorization” (Kegan, 1994) of their own perspectives. They also demonstrate dialogue and the feedback loop from which modified ideas and directions emerge. This commentary assignme particularly enacts guidelines one, two, four, five, and ten by personalizin varying structure, stressing multiple-perspective taking, encouraging metacognition, and encouraging interpersonal process awareness.

The sequential brainstorming method of case conferencing. In this activ group members are asked to present their "working models" of cases least once per semester by means of a planned case presentation. Whe case presentation, itself, is common in such seminars, the "sequenti brainstorming" method offers an inclusive and freeing twist to th presentation activity. The brainstorming and sequencing dimension legitimizes all ideas and give each voice in the room a forum from which 1 speak. The activity begins with students first sharing their understanding of both a case and of their reasons for presenting it by means of th common "S.O.A.P." model of presentation. I have described such a cas presentation method for use in staff group supervision elsewhere (McAuliffe, 1992). The four parts of this initial student presentation consist of:
(1) "S" or "Subjective:" in which presenters share their reasons for bringing their particular case (e.g., any questions she or he may have) and the initial presenting concern of the client to the agency and/or the individual.

(2) "O" or "Objective:" consists of a concise description of the client’s personal and cultural dimensions, including significant events, physical health, parents, and range of eight cultural issues that are subsumed under the rubric "GARREACS," for gender, age, religion, race, ethnicity, ability/disability, class, and sexual orientation (cf. McAuliffe, 2002a, for a description of the model and related cultural awareness activities). The presenters also describe their own constructions of these social and cultural factors—that is—how they respond to them.

(3) "A" or "Assessment:" is made up of the student’s tentative offering of a conception of the client. The DSM can be used as one vehicle for such an action. However, in constructivist fashion, the DSM can be also deconstructed for its limits (Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin, & Stowell-Smith, 1996). More constructivist approaches to assessment, such as the "Context-Phase-Stage-Style" assessment model (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999), might be included in this portion of the presentation.

(4) "P" or "Plan:" gives the presenter a chance to posit a tentative future action plan for the client, as well as to share what work has been done so far in the case.

What happens after the student presents the case in S.O.A.P. fashion is now crucial for students’ constructive development. All listeners share with presenters any ideas that have occurred to them during the presentation, from seemingly important themes, to suggestions for action, to questions about compelling issues, to "wild hunches." As these ideas are shared orally, the presenter writes them down in shorthand, without responding, in order to honor each. In the next phase of the activity, the presenter addresses any of the ideas—responding to questions, noting surprises, exploring new possibilities, and asking for clarification. Finally, a discussion among group members closes the activity.

Two dimensions of this activity can empower students and encourage movement toward constructivist thinking: the universal participation and the legitimizing of all ideas. Through the somewhat paradoxical requirement that students share at least one idea, but that this idea can be anything, students might experience the social construction of knowledge in action. Through this method, students again see peers as legitimate contributors to knowledge. They "kill the Buddha" (i.e., dethrone the instructor) as the ultimate authority on the road to knowing. Guidelines one, four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine are particularly expressed through the sequential brainstorming case conferencing activity through its encouragement of personalizing, multiple perspectives, metacognition, questioning categorical thinking, recognition of conflict as the norm, showing commitment in the face of doubt, and valuing of approximation.

**Other instructional elements for instigating constructive development**

**Student-to-Student Discussion.** A general proviso for the internship seminar might be that student talk time and activity with each other be maximized, with the opposite being the case for the instructor. College teachers are inclined to dominate the conversation in class (Belenky et al., 1986). Students’ silence, or their directing discussion and questions only to the authority/instructor reinforces received, non-constructivist knowing. It can be difficult, but developmentally important for students, for the instructor to allow the group to carry the talk. I often will ask each student to comment, in turn, on an issue, thereby bringing all voices in to the discussion.

**Role Play.** Role play is another instigating activity. While it is a known tool for instruction, it can often be underutilized in internship seminar, frequently giving way to discussion “about” a case or situation. Role-play offers an opportunity for students to “induce” or discover patterns and hypotheses from lived experience. It is a vehicle for the kind of “deep learning” that Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle has demonstrated, if the cycle is utilized. Many of the situations that students write about in their between sessions commentary are ripe for role play. With student permission, the instructor can suggest acting out dilemmas. Then discussion can focus on choices, metacognitions, group dynamics, dealing with conflict, making commitment to decisions or actions, and other dimensions of the constructive-developmental guidelines.

**Conclusion**

The guidelines offered here should maximize the opportunity for students to move toward constructivist thinking. However, empirical evidence of the value of the CDI seminar is still needed, and we must rely on analogous studies of developmental instruction for confidence in its efficacy (e.g., Mentkowski & Associates, 2000). Research on the CDI internship seminar might take the form of initially noting the differences in the commentaries of the non-constructivist and constructivist thinkers by qualitative thematic analysis. Outcome research might consist of comparing a CDI seminar with a non-CDI seminar and noting post-internship changes in the non-constructivist thinkers via objective measurement (e.g., Moore, 1987), student writing (e.g., Lovell & Nunnery, 2002) or post-course student interviews (e.g., McAuliffe, 2002b).

With the proviso on the need for empirical support in mind, I have proposed that the constructive-developmental human services internship seminar can...
be a particularly rich environment for expanding students' ways of knowing. It especially offers a vehicle for the "reflective observation" dimension of the experiential learning cycle. The seminar is also often the first opportunity for many students to see themselves as participants in knowledge creation, as "players" in the construction of human services work, rather than as mere recipients of received, conventional wisdom. The seminar expresses the possibility of a more democratic education, one that allows students to become active authors of their professional life, that is, constructivists themselves.

References


McAuliffe is associate professor at Old Dominion University.