

TEACHING CRISIS INTERVENTION AT A UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

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This paper points out the importance of teaching crisis intervention skills as part of the professional training of human service workers at a university. The difference between training community mental health volunteers and college students is discussed. The text book, the instruction, and the use of the library's closed reserve are also presented. Role playing is seen as a vital aspect of training in a professional program. Criteria that constitute a good crisis intervention course are outlined.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of providing instruction in crisis intervention is usually specifically related to a goal of a program. Crisis intervention techniques are always taught to individuals who are interested in volunteering their services for a hot line that is part of a community mental health center. Recently we have seen specific training for crisis workers in rape and domestic violence hot lines. Even more recently, crisis intervention counseling is being used in a national pilot project called "Friend in Court." This new program provides a supplement to the legal counsel of a court appointed attorney. In the early days of crisis intervention training, the goal was to provide the worker/volunteer with general skills. Today there is a clear trend in utilizing crisis intervention skills for specific problem populations. Crisis intervention training has evolved from the general to the specific.

From teaching crisis intervention to college students as a regular part of their social work curriculum since 1977, I have made several observations. First, students appreciate the concept of crisis intervention. Most have found themselves in crisis during their college career. If not themselves, often their peers may have trouble with the law or with their parents. This exposure leads to a genuine enjoyment of LEARNING how to deal with crisis. Students who have a reputation for cutting class are less apt to do so during the study of crisis intervention. They immediately recognize the direct application when they return to their dorm. They also seem to come to grips with their own personal problems.

The second observation deals with a more theoretical aspect of crisis intervention. Models used in crisis intervention tend to be eclectic. Eclecticism is frowned upon by some scholars, but there are great advantages in teaching. Crisis intervention provides a great opportunity for students to learn

theory. Most importantly, it produces a thirst to learn counseling and personality theory. For example, I teach casework theory in one course and crisis intervention in another. After we have completed crisis intervention, it is common for a student to approach me and say, "Now, I understand what you mean by theory in that other course! A light just went off in my head."

The third observation is employability upon graduation. Alumni return to inform me that they are asked about crisis intervention training in many job interviews. Crisis intervention is a marketable skill. For example, a 1984 graduate was frustrated about her lack of success in finding traditional employment in social work upon graduation. She finally accepted a position as a receptionist in a physician's office (a general practitioner). During the interview, he discovered that my former student had training in crisis intervention counseling. He was very happy about her counseling skills and plans to utilize her skills in dealing with patients whose illness is accompanied by a major crisis. He plans on an immediate increase of pay for her, changing her job position, and eventually hiring a receptionist! Crisis intervention training does help the student in a tight job market.

THE MAJOR ISSUES IN TEACHING

There are three major aspects to teaching an effective crisis intervention at a university level. They are 1) the quality and type of text book; 2) the methods and sources used during lectures; and 3) supplemental readings that can be put on closed reserve of the library. Each of these aspects are discussed.

THE TEXT BOOK

The text book (Crow, 1977) I have used since 1977 has a rich and powerful history. It is an unusual book because students seem to read it from cover to cover. The strangest aspect is that a used copy of

the text has never been sold to the university book store. Every cohort of college students are short of money; it is common to see even major texts in their fields being returned for some extra cash. Although students do not sell their used copies, some academics find little use for this text. In an early book review, Parad (1979) suggested that the book had "limited usefulness to most human service professionals." Parad did not appreciate the robust nature of the conceptual framework outlined within the book. Although the text is out of print, I have special permission to publish the manuscript at our University Press. Thus, the book is still in use.

Actually the harsh criticisms of Parad are probably assets rather than liabilities. Students find the text a refreshing break from other text books--even other social work text books. This is one explanation of why students refuse to sell their used copies to the bookstore. The simplicity of the text accomplishes two major goals. First, it reduces a complex conceptual framework to a point where it can be used by the novice BUT without losing significant theoretical substance. At first glance, most scholars who review the text perceive it as being "Reader's Digest quality" because of the folksy writing style of Crow. However, the writing style should not be considered part of the nuts and bolts of a theoretical perspective. Second, the simplicity of the style encourages students to read other material related to crisis intervention: marriage therapy, family therapy and group therapy. Colleagues who specialize in the study of reading comprehension tell me that this is a common phenomenon among college students. Reading less complex material about a particular subject matter creates a thirst to read more complex material with greater comprehension.

The hallmark of the book is not its use of a hybrid of "Rational Emotive," "Transactional Analysis," and "Client-Centered" therapies, but rather the added construct which vividly provides a format which students can use to concretely picture a crisis in their

mines. Concepts such as "now potential," "self-resolution factor," "participating event," and "crisis color" provide a workable and effective guideline for dealing with a wide variation of crisis situations, from the person considering suicide to the caller who is a masturbator. The concepts become an integral part of their approach to a client in crisis.

THE INSTRUCTION

The major difference between teaching crisis intervention to university students and community mental health volunteers is the stress that is placed on the theoretical underpinnings and the philosophy of crisis intervention. Unlike the trained volunteer, the college graduate who has completed a course in crisis intervention has a deeper appreciation of crisis counseling. College students receive an in-depth analysis of "why," "how," and "when;" while volunteers concentrate their energies on the "how" without the philosophical considerations. The graduate can teach crisis intervention to community volunteers.

The instructional objective in teaching crisis intervention at a university is to provide the theoretical foundation for dealing the three manners in which a crisis is introduced to the crisis worker:

- 1) A phone conversation.
- 2) A walk-in client.
- 3) A long-term client with a sudden new crisis.

Clearly, the objective of the university is not the same as the mental health center that is interested in training community volunteers. However, there are two aspects of instruction common to both: 1) lecture; and 2) role playing.

Role playing is common both within a college course and with the training of community volunteers.

Typically, each volunteer or student creates a crisis situation and then plays the role of the client while another student or volunteer plays the role of the crisis worker. Thus, everyone is given an opportunity to play both roles. Role playing is reinforcement. It enables the crisis worker to effectively use the techniques he/she has learned in the lecture section of the instruction. More reinforcement learning is offered during a discussion period following each role play. The person playing the role of the client is often asked, "How did you feel when the worker said..." Many new insights are gained to the student via the discussion following the role play. Role play demonstrates whether students actually can apply the material they learned from instruction and reading.

There is another type of role-playing which is not seen by volunteers in training. In the classroom, crisis scripts are read and used to identify the utility of the theoretical concepts presented within the text. The ready-made scripts are used in the same manner as the student-created crisis situations. Each student has a chance to play both client and crisis worker. After the reading of the script, students discuss the theory and begin to understand the casual relationships within the interaction of the worker and the client in the script. Unlike the created role, the script from the text provides a healthy opportunity for theoretical reflection. For example, each script focuses on a particular aspect of the theoretical construct presented within the text. In discussions, students are forced to identify what technique is being used, why it is used and how it achieved the philosophical objective of crisis intervention counseling. Later, the scripts become more complex. Students are able to notice that a wide variety of techniques are used in many crisis counseling situations. Following the discussions, students are able to understand the merits of such responses. Role playing the scripts offers a valuable reinforcement of genuine learning of crisis intervention counseling skills.

The combination of role-playing techniques provides an extremely effective method for comprehending the essence of crisis counseling. During role play exercises, the most commonly asked question by students is, "What would you do if..." The response is, "How would the author of your text conceptualize it?" Students are forced to reflect and use the theory and in most cases effectively answer their own questions. This added aspect of role playing also reinforces the learning of the material. When an individual is forced to reflect and orally respond to a complex subject matter, he/she is less likely to forget material and more likely to be able to apply it.

OUTSIDE READING

I usually require readings on closed reserve in the library. Reading selections are based on their relevance, timeliness, and general quality. Five objectives require the need for supplemental readings. First, closed reserve readings reinforce learning from the text, from the instructor, and from the role playing. Students are likely to pick up a clearer understanding about a particular concept in extra reading when they might miss it from the text or lecture. The inverse of this is also true. Second, no text can thoroughly cover the three types of clients mentioned on earlier. Outside readings surely help. Third, outside readings can provide special focus on particular problems. Fourth, they highlight the role playing scripts by elaborating on specific crisis intervention issues. Outside readings reinforce difficult-to-grasp theoretical concepts. Finally, good outside readings will facilitate class interaction and discussion. In lectures and in role playing, students will mention and recognize a concept from closed reserve reading list; however, the closed reserved reading might have had a "different twist to it." Such comments indicate that students have a competent understanding of crisis intervention counseling.

SUMMARY

In summary, three points can be made. First, there is a significant difference between teaching college students and training community mental health volunteers in crisis intervention skills. Differences can be noted in the degree of emphasis. College students concentrate much of their study effort on the philosophical foundations of crisis intervention counseling. How does one define "crisis," and what are the bases on which it is appropriate to intervene? Students commonly ask questions such as, "Since the client has a right to self-determination, do I have the right to attempt to stop that person from committing suicide?" The sound philosophical basis will provide the student with deeper understanding of the client's situation and thus will enable him/her to respond quickly in an appropriate and effective manner.

At the university, the crisis intervention student learns theory. Like the philosophy of crisis intervention, a good theoretical foundation creates a sound bases on which the student can have a clear understanding of various problems faced by the individual in crisis. Not only does good theory provide the basis for empathy, it also creates the foundation for the verbal and non-verbal interaction between client and crisis worker. The sound theoretical foundation will provide the worker with the key to knowing, "what shall I say next?" Under what circumstances should I be reflective and under what circumstances should I be directive? Although both the volunteer and the student come to grips with these issues, the student has a deeper understanding of WHAT he/she is doing and WHY he/she is doing it.

The philosophy and theory of crisis counseling lays the foundation for a deductive process. A crisis course at a university should be more deductive than the training received by community mental health volunteers. As stated earlier the crisis

intervention movement has evolved from general types of crisis care (i.e., in a community mental health center hot line) to more specific types of crisis care (i.e., the rape crisis hot line). Volunteers are trained to deal with specific problems areas whereas the college student's philosophical background enables him/her to effectively deal with various crisis situations. The college student's knowledge base moves from general to specific while the volunteer's knowledge base moves from specific to general. For example, the volunteer with the rape crisis service first learns about the psychological and sociolegal process of the rape. This understanding leads to the effective use of essential qualities in counseling which can be generalized to other crisis populations. College students begin with the essential qualities and then acquire specific knowledge of the dynamics involved in particular crisis situations. Concrete issues like the sociolegal process of rape are quickly comprehended when a solid foundation of theory and philosophy are laid.

The second issue addresses the value of teaching college students crisis intervention. There are financial, educational and personal values. Clearly, mastering crisis intervention as a treatment mode increases the employability of a student during a time in which the job market for human service professionals is tight. In terms of educational value, the learning of crisis intervention provides a solid basis from which to learn other types of intervention (i.e., individual, marital, family and group.) In fact, some may conclude that when a client system contracts for any type of therapeutic intervention, a perceived crisis exists. Years of experience in teaching tell me that when students learn crisis intervention skills, they begin to develop a greater sense of self-confidence. Thus, the teaching of crises intervention is highly valuable at the university level.

Finally, we end this essay with a question and an answer. What constitutes a good crisis interven-

tion course at a university? The answer is fourfold: One, a good book: A good crisis intervention text book has a solid and readable philosophical and theoretical foundation. It is comprehensive, general and leads to deductive learning. Two, good outside reading: Good closed reserve readings enhance and focus on philosophical, theoretical and specific problems related to providing crisis intervention services. Good role playing: Good role playing not only provides each person an opportunity to play sides, also provides theoretical insight. Good role play through the use of pre-written scripts gives the opportunity for students to analyze various aspects of the theoretical construct presented within the text. It also demonstrates whether the student can apply what he/she has learned. Good teaching: Good teaching involves the empathetic understanding of the student's lack of confidence and skills. It is nurturing the nervous student who is role playing for the first time when the entire class is watching all the mistakes. A professor, who knows he has done a good job when an alumnus returns after several years to say, "By gosh, that crisis intervention stuff has really helped me!"

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