

Power-Sharing with Our Students in Course Design as a Model for Counselor-Client Relationships

Cultural humility, antiracism, and client empowerment are theoretical ideals in counseling. However, the typical classroom educating counselors assumes a traditional hierarchical model of power and knowledge. Therefore, as educators, we are asking our students to assume one model of relationships while we teach with another. This brief presents an alternative method, utilizing the principles of cultural humility and antiracism to power-share with our students, modeling their future work with clients.

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Cultural humility, antiracism and client empowerment are key theories that guide the implementation of counseling with diverse groups. Cultural humility, as opposed to cultural competence, emphasizes a not-knowing approach that acknowledges clients as experts in their lived experiences (Hampton et al., 2017). The three-part definition of cultural humility includes a commitment to life-long learning and reflection, recognizing power imbalances in relationships, and recognizing structural inequities and holding institutions accountable (Hampton et al., 2017). Cultural humility and antiracism overlap in their emphasis on both acknowledging and working to deconstruct policies and procedures that have differential impacts on our clients (Courneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012; Hampton et al., 2017).

Antiracist and anti-oppressive practice emphasize seven key factors in practice including client empowerment, education, building alliances, reflecting on language, the use of alternative healing strategies, advocacy/activism, and fostering reflexivity (Courneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). All these can have a parallel process in instructor-student relationships. For example, antiracist emphasis on client empowerment centers our client's strengths and resources rather than using a deficit model and emphasizes, "involving service users in decisions that concern them within all components of care," (Courneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012, p. 269). In education, we can involve our students in decisions that concern them in the classroom. All these approaches center our clients' experiences and encourage self-reflection on our own identities as counselors (Courneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). We encourage our students to engage in race dialogues and dismantle racism in counseling agencies (Bemak & Chung, 2019) and therefore we, as instructors, must do the same in classroom.

However, while the field espouses and supports these vehicles for delivery of client services, little has been written about applying the same principles to our relationships with students. Yet, research shows that, during higher education, students of color, students with disabilities, and other marginalized students face the additional barriers of stereotype threat, microaggressions, and imposter syndrome, which affects student retention, achievement, and well-being (Nadal et al., 2021). Indeed, there are well-documented educational attainment and retention gaps for students from historically marginalized and oppressed groups (NSC Research Center, 2019). BIPOC counseling students are more likely to experience academic discrimination, including other students thinking they are not as capable or smart, and these students commonly attribute this treatment to their race, gender, or age (Basma et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that this discrimination has a key relationship to student wellness, with higher levels of discrimination predicting lower student well-being (Basma et al., 2021). Supporting student wellness and belonging for all students is a foundational principle of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs' standards (CACREP, 2016).

Addressing student wellness through the curriculum, as opposed to student support services, is one way to ensure more students are reached. Antiracist content, including readings, are more likely to be integrated into counselor education curriculum than are antiracist teaching methods, defined as those that address and attempt to deconstruct power relationships in the classroom (Kishimoto, 2018). Previous research identifies that one way to integrate antiracism into counselor education curriculum is to decenter whiteness in our programs (Williams et al., 2021). I suggest this can be done by power-sharing with our students in a variety of ways.

DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

In counseling relationships, antiracist counselors acknowledge power differentials from the first interaction (Hampton et al., 2017). They use cultural humility to acknowledge their lack of knowledge and willingness to learn from their clients (Hampton et al., 2017) and work to dismantle power hierarchies that oppress and marginalize their clients (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1988). Counselor education provides a unique opportunity to integrate inclusive and antiracist teaching practices both as a method of and the content goal of instruction. Meaning, within this discipline, instruction about why antiracism and cultural humility are ideals in the field can help contextualize teaching practices that mirror social justice practices expected of these students with future clients. Power-sharing with our students may be one way to work towards an antiracist and anti-oppressive classroom (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Power-sharing can be thought of as a framework for understanding our relationships with students (Addy et al., 2021), as well as a set of practices to reduce power imbalances in the classroom (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

I have implemented these strategies in an undergraduate counseling degree program with the title, “Rehabilitation and Human Services,” which is connected to graduate programs in counselor education and includes courses in counseling theories, group counseling, and case management. The students in this program typically pursue either graduate school or work in entry-level counseling positions, such as a mental health worker or a behavioral aid. The courses are upper level, typically taken by students during their third or fourth years of a four-year program. Typical enrollment ranges from 10 - 30 students. The students are similar to counseling students in many ways but with less experience, and therefore, I expect these strategies would work as well, if not better, with graduate students. In the following subsections, I will discuss power-sharing, as a framework, and practices that can be implemented during course creation, course delivery, and course assessment.

Power-Sharing as Framework

This teaching practice brief describes not just an instructional strategy but an instructional attitude, which acknowledges the instructors lack of knowledge of student background, strengths, and challenges. Power-sharing, informed by antiracism, acknowledges the power differential in the classroom and works to deconstruct it from day one in the class. In my classes, I hold the power as the instructor, but also in other key ways, which are often unacknowledged, including through my intersectional identities as an able-bodied, cisgender,

white woman. I begin class by discussing my identities, power in the classroom, and my efforts to make classes more inclusive. I explain that I use a “not-knowing” approach to student interactions, circumstances, and barriers to success. “Not-knowing” is an approach utilized in counseling, aligned with Carl Roger’s person-centered approach (1959), which contextualizes the client as an expert in their experience with agency to choose a path towards health or, in this case, education (Proctor et al., 2021). Indeed, Carl Rogers wrote about many innovative power-sharing practices in the classroom, including collaboratively designing a course and self-grading (Rogers, 1969).

Power-sharing as a mindset is more difficult to define but includes practical strategies, such as the organization of a classroom and the location of the professor. For example, I take time to re-organize desks, in a traditional classroom setting, to a circle, often taking a seat among the students for discussions. By discussing my emphasis on power-sharing and efforts towards inclusive teaching at the start of the class, my goal is to create an environment where students feel comfortable voicing their interests, needs, and strengths in the classroom, most of which I would not be aware of otherwise. For example, in one post-pandemic class, students requested “Mental Health Days,” defined as days when they would typically have class, but it is canceled to allow them to take care of themselves. This policy was utilized by the entire university during the pandemic but rolled back when we returned to traditional instruction. Because I had discussed my desire for an inclusive classroom, I was able to learn what was important to students and implement it.

Power-Sharing in Course Creation

Cocreation of a course with students has been associated with superior instructor ratings and higher levels of engagement and empowerment (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2015), however researchers highlight that it is “underutilized” (Bovill, 2020). I believe counselor education and supervision should lead the field on class co-creation and power-sharing, as this model has been written about and researched in our field for decades regarding client relationships (Rogers, 1969; Williams & O’Connor, 2019). Therefore, co-creation in the classroom does not just serve the students in our classroom but provides them with a model of how one can power-share in counseling. The first and incredibly power-laden task of a class is the syllabus. The syllabus structures policies and assessments that almost always advantages some students over others and implies a certain type of student belongs in the classroom (Fuentes et al., 2020; Richmann et al., 2020). For example, attendance policies might advantage students who do not work, have family members to care for, and have reliable transportation.

In several undergraduate counseling courses I taught, students were invited to co-create the syllabus, including policies, classroom procedures, and assessment methods. I shared with students a list of things we could co-create and things that we did not have power to co-create (i.e., course description, meeting modality; see Table 1). Once the context was laid, students were invited to work in small groups on one piece of the syllabus at a time. To facilitate and provide structure to this aspect, students were provided with a syllabus from a previous iteration of the course. However, I emphasized the students’ power to completely revamp the course. While floating from group to group, I encouraged students to think big,

with questions like, “Do we need a midterm at all? Why or why not?” Students were initially hesitant in their participation, a challenge that has previously been highlighted when students have been granted minimal power in course design (Meinking & Hall, 2020). Following the first day of class, students were instructed to read the sample syllabus closely. On the second day of class, students worked diligently in groups while I answered questions throughout. Following small group discussion, we discussed design ideas as a class. I utilized a variety of methods to ensure inclusive participation, including anonymous polling software, sending them back to small groups, and mixing groups. As the instructor, I sat in a circle with the students, took notes on their design, and asked clarifying questions. After this second day, I told them I would formalize their course design in a syllabus provided to them in the following week of class. Students reviewed my work to ensure it accurately reflected their design, and I made minor modifications.

Table 1

Elements of Course Design Available for Co-Creation

COURSE ELEMENTS WHICH CANNOT CHANGE	COURSE ELEMENTS WHICH CAN BE REDESIGNED
Course description	Classroom policies on attendance
Course objectives	Classroom community guidelines
University wide policies on disability	Assignments
Academic integrity policies	Due dates
University assessment requirements	Grading methods
	Topics

In addition to the policies and the structure of the class, instructors can allow students to select the topics covered in a class. An instructor of a sustainability course has students select topics and associated readings, after the first third of the class is completed (Thomas, 2022). In this approach, the students learn about the general topic (i.e., sustainability) but then are encouraged to brainstorm what issues and concerns they have about sustainability, which results in a list of topics students can vote on to determine the remaining coverage for the semester. In counseling courses, this may translate to allowing students to select which counseling theories to focus upon once the primary theories are introduced. Student choice in readings, and its benefits (i.e., improved engagement, overall reading), have been written about in K-12 schooling (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Still student choice is used less frequently in higher education. I adopted a modified version of student-selected readings in a course on mindfulness. Students were provided a list of readings, videos, and recordings for each topic and selected two to complete for each week. My subjective perception was that students were better prepared and more frequently completed outside readings when offered choice.

Power-Sharing in Course Delivery

Once the class is designed, there are still several ways that instructors can continue to power-share, including utilizing a students-as-partners feedback loop (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), inquiry-based learning (Aditomo et al., 2013), inviting students to teach course sections, and

using technology-facilitated anonymous responding. Students as Partners (SaP) is a well-defined theory of how students can be involved in the development and delivery of instruction (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), emphasizing shared power and learning. In this model, selected students often provide regular feedback to teaching faculty, who continually revise teaching and assessment methods accordingly. The model has been associated with enhanced motivation, increased academic identity, and improved classroom experiences (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

While SaP allows continual feedback from students, teaching strategies within each class session can be utilized to minimize power differentials and encourage student voice. Inquiry based learning (IBL), tied to the work of John Dewey (1916) is a pedagogical strategy where students work, often collaboratively, to investigate a topic or problem (Aditomo et al., 2013). IBL has also been considered as a potential socially-just approach to learning in higher education, as it is not based on previously-acquired knowledge and encourages thinking rather than knowing (Summerlee, 2018). IBL fits well because there are many ways of knowing in counseling. For example, in my classes, I often pose a particular problem or controversy in the field (i.e., the use of the word ‘abnormal’ in mental health counseling) and encourage students to think through the challenges and develop solutions in small groups. In addition to working in small groups, students can be invited to teach sections of the course as another method of power-sharing. Student presentations are frequently utilized in higher education; however, they have challenges, including leaving the rest of the class disengaged and student anxiety about performance (Griever et al., 2021). To address these issues, in my classes, students facilitate discussions rather than present. For example, students in mental health counseling facilitate by selecting a celebrity who has spoken publicly about a mental health struggle and then walk the class through discussions of diagnosis, differential diagnosis, and treatment discussions. These facilitations, rather than presentations, are designed to encourage student voice, power-sharing, active learning and reduce student anxiety about presentations by focusing on their ability to facilitate whole-class learning rather than demonstrate their own knowledge.

Finally, the use of anonymous electronic response systems (ERS) throughout the class is an inclusive approach that enables students to voice their opinions and questions (Pichardo et al., 2021). Compared to a traditional “raise your hand” model, anonymous responding is less likely to include only a small group of privileged students who continually participate and allows students with minority opinions and quieter students to express themselves (Barr, 2017). Research shows the use of ERS increases participation, engagement, and comprehension (Barr, 2017; Pichardo et al., 2021). Many anonymous responses can be utilized including Tophat, Google Jamboard, Mentimeter, and Padlet.

ASSESSMENT METHODS & POWER-SHARING

Regarding assessment, I suggest two methods for power-sharing with students to create an anti-oppressive classroom: (a) methods of ungrading and (b) creating multiple options for each assessment point to allow students’ choice. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for giving students choice and voice in how they express their learning (Meyer et al., 2013; Westine et al., 2019). However, research on the implementation of UDL demonstrates

that, while instructors are often willing to represent information to students in multiple ways (i.e., in videos, lectures, documents), they are less willing to allow students to provide that information back to them in multiple ways (Westine et al., 2019). Perhaps this is because of instructor uncertainty about how to allow multiple assessment options while maintaining equality and “rigor.” However, as has been written about previously, “rigor” may simply be code for “not everyone belongs here,” (Hanesworth et al., 2019; McArthur, 2016). Similarly, a concern with equality may be overshadowing equity and causing the differential student outcomes with which higher education is currently concerned (NSC Research Center, 2019). Unilateral assessment strategies differentially oppress certain groups of students. For example, assessment policies that rely solely on written work advantage students with English as a first language. Traditional tests advantage students who do not have test anxiety, as 1/3 of students do (Gerwing et al., 2015).

I will describe several examples of including choice in assessment. For a course which previously had a traditional final exam, I included an alternative pre-recorded final presentation or final paper. The final paper or presentation had set page/time requirements and both included a big picture overview of the class, 5 key topics in detail with citations, and a personal reflection on the student’s take-aways from the class. Similarly, in a course with regular quizzes that were designed to ensure students completed and understood their readings, I added a “notes summary” option in which students could submit two pages of typed and organized notes from their readings that covered five topics in detail. These alternative assignments do initially create more work for the instructor, as I wrote detailed instructions and created rubrics for each alternative to provide student guidance. However, when grading, I found the different options kept fatigue at bay.

Instructors yield a great deal of power in assigning grades. Students’ fear of being penalized in grading impacts their peer interactions, interactions with faculty, and willingness to take risks in the classroom (Kohn, 2013). Power-sharing can be done through various methods of ungrading (Blum, 2020). Labor-based grading is a form of ungrading in which the students are evaluated on their effort and participation (e.g., effort of writing an appropriate length paper) (Inoue, 2019). Students are typically given extensive feedback in labor-based grading and permitted to engage in numerous revise-and-resubmits. This permits students more agency over their ultimate grade in the class. A grading contract is created that defines a baseline grade students will receive if they complete all labor requirements (Inoue, 2019). Students may increase their grade by engaging in ‘extra’ labor. Figure 1 shows the labor-based grading chart I used in my class. Another form of ungrading is self-grading, which gives students even more power over their final grade as they assign a grade based on agreed-upon standards, and it has been proposed as a method to disrupt oppressive power schemes in higher education and improves student agency (Nieminen, 2020; Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020).

Figure 1.*Labor-Based Grading Contract & Student Instructions*

Grade	Number of Non-Participation Days	Number of Late Assignments	Number of Ignored Assignments
B	0-4	0-4	2 Community Site Lecture Participation & Associated Site Notes
C	5-6	5	+1 to above OR any ignored other assignment (quizzes/presentations)
D	more than 6	6 or more	+1 to above

So now you're probably wondering, *OK, what if I want to earn more than a B? Is there any way to get an A in this course?* The B grade is simply the baseline, and you can improve your grade by one increment (B to B-plus, B-plus to A-minus, A-minus to A) every time you do one of the following optional items of labor:

- Service-Learning

There are 10 community sites associated with our class. You may choose to complete service-learning at one of the pre-arranged sites (see Community Partner sheet in Canvas). Each 5 hours will increase your default grade one increment. Up to 15 hours will be accepted, leading to three grade increment increases.

- Professional Plan Parts A-C

As we learn about human services, you may complete a three-part professional plan (rubrics and outlines provided on Canvas). Each part completed will increase your default grade one increment, leading to up to three possible grade increment increases.

Even if you only meet the terms for a C-minus or D-minus, you can still move up the ladder with these additional labor opportunities. For each one completed, you'll earn one grade increment (i.e., C-minus to C; D-plus to C-minus; etc.).

Exemplary labor: If by our final meeting at the end of semester, you do not miss any classes and have no late or ignored assignments, then you will earn an extra grade increment (equal to one extra labor item) to your final course grade. This rule is meant to reward those who engage in all the work of the course in the fullest spirit asked of them and demonstrate themselves to be exemplary class citizens.

EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

Power-sharing in the classroom can be a difficult framework to assess. Methods for assessing instructor attitudes towards inclusion have been developed (Addy et al., 2021), but are more focused on a framework rather than actual practices and are designed to assess faculty perception. In my classes, a variety of formal and informal methods were used to evaluate the impact of power-sharing, including professor reflection, student surveys, and focus groups.

Regarding the collaborative syllabus design, utilizing several days at the beginning and throughout the semester to engage in course design discussions may be a noted weakness. However, in our discipline, I believe it is a strength. The process of collaborative design became the content. As the courses progressed and we discussed health inequities, racism, antiracism, and utilizing strength-based client empowerment strategies, students themselves made the links to how we did that in our class. For example, in anonymous survey questions about the class, several students' comments noted that the time spent engaging in course design meant that our class was "person-centered," suggesting they made the link between anti-oppressive frameworks and the course activities.

Students completed anonymous surveys at the mid-point in the semester, which included questions about their perception of collaborative work in the courses. Student comments emphasized trust, respect, collaboration, and power. For example, one student noted the activity, "gives the students a voice and a feeling of power." Another theme was students' appreciation of multiple options in their course assignments as one student comment notes, "I liked how there are options with certain assignments so if you're not comfortable with doing an assignment, you have a choice to complete it another way." A third theme from students' comments was how the opening activity created a sense of belonging and community in the class. For example, one student explained, "I felt like the class even in the beginning of having meetings was able to get to know each other and work together early on which makes it easier to collaborate later in things like treatment teams or just in our case management roles." On the mid-semester surveys, no students noted any disadvantages of collaborative work.

In the course that utilized labor-based grading, students participated in a focus group at the end of the class. While more in-depth exploration was facilitated by the focus group methodology, the themes were similar. For example, students emphasized their appreciation of choices of assessment. One student explained, "I felt like it was good because there was an option if you wanted to make service-learning or paper." Another student said, "So I think it allows for a lot of, you know, options for you to still succeed without having to follow one path." A second theme from the focus groups was that the course was "less stressful" because they were less concerned about grades. One student noted, "I think that really helped me, like eliminate some of the stress with it and to get it done and things like that." This alleviation of stress due to factors outside of student control is a goal of power-sharing. In a traditionally graded course, students may have knowledge and ability, but the assessment methods may not permit the expression of that knowledge (Hanesworth et al., 2019; McArthur, 2016). As noted previously in this paper, students from marginalized populations, including racial minorities and students with disabilities, are more likely to experience academic stress that interferes with performance (Nadal et al., 2021). In the course with labor-based grading, course quizzes included multiple attempts, and students noted in the focus groups that this resulted not only in less stress but also more learning: "The multiple attempts on the quizzes. I think I learned more from that than just a one time, trying to cram it in beforehand. Because I genuinely, even though it wasn't the same questions in the same order when I would retake it. It also helped retain more. So, I also appreciated that part. Because I ended up getting a good grade and learning."

IMPLICATIONS

In this brief, I have outlined a framework for power-sharing with students that I believe is consistent with antiracist teaching (Kishimoto, 2018). Many instructors may be unwilling to relinquish power over course design. This barrier may be fed by underlying beliefs that students are unmotivated and require instructor control and carefully doled out rewards and punishments to engage in learning (hooks, 1994). However, research suggests that external rewards and punishments may decrease student agency, motivation, and ultimately, learning (Kohn, 2013). If power-sharing is one method of antiracist teaching practice, as I suggest, then counselor educators should be leaders, as the field has spent decades analyzing, researching, and dismantling power dynamics in relationships in pursuit of more socially-just treatment (Hays, 2020). Power-sharing allows us to move from integrating antiracist content to utilizing an antiracist framework in our relationships with students (Kishimoto, 2018)

Ethical Considerations

Providing an education in which students feel a sense of belonging and wellness and that develops social justice competencies and skills is required by CACREP (CACREP, 2016). Therefore, in addition to directly teaching about the impacts of structural racism and oppression within the counseling field (Kalin, 2021; Matsuzaka & Knapp, 2020; Shim, 2021), we must also create course contexts that permit the success of a diverse student body. Therefore, we need strategies and research on how counseling education can create inclusive classroom environments. Attempts to power-share with students could reinforce the majority student opinion, further oppressing marginalized students (de Bie, 2020). However, there are some well-defined strategies in place to assist with this, including the use of anonymous electronic response systems (Barr, 2017; Pichardo et al., 2021).

Limitations

I have described many methods of power-sharing with students in course creation, course delivery, and course assessment to create classrooms that are less racist and oppressive than traditional higher education schemes (Hanesworth et al., 2019; Kishimoto, 2018). However, a limitation is my lack of quantitative data on whether these strategies lead to more inclusive classrooms, though the qualitative feedback is beneficial. Comparing a traditional class versus one designed with a power-sharing framework on features like belonging, inclusion, and alliance would be a helpful future step. I also make the case that counselor education can lead the field in antiracist teaching as they continue to do so in antiracist counseling (Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012; Hampton et al., 2017) and that this parallel process would better prepare our students to power-share in counseling relationships. However, while this parallel is logical, I do not have enough data to support the claim.

Future Directions

If we continue to draw a parallel between inclusive, antiracist teaching and counseling, there are several future directions the research can take, including instructor identity development, instructor-student alliance, and exploring whether utilizing power-sharing in the classroom

leads students to more egalitarian client relationships. First, we must acknowledge the importance of a teacher's own identity development. Much work has been done on the impact of identity development of counselors, particularly white counselors working with minority clients (Helms, 1995; 2020). I suggest a similar parallel could be drawn in teaching: the lower the social identities development of the instructor, the less likely their courses are to be inclusive, and the more likely they are to reinforce the racist and oppressive nature of higher education (Utt & Tochluk, 2020). Future research could build on counseling-client relations and assess whether instructor identity development is associated with increased flexibility and willingness to power-share. Secondly, research in counseling has identified the importance of counselor-client alliance (Norcross, 2010). Rogers' (1959) work on alliance and rapport identified key components, including seeing the client in a positive fashion and believing in the client's innate capacity for growth. Again, a parallel might occur in teaching (Rogers, 1969), such that the stronger the alliance between student and professor, the stronger the learning outcomes (Ryan et al., 2011). Finally, our field would benefit from evaluations of whether courses with power-sharing practices result in student trainees engaging in more power-sharing with clients during clinical internships and beyond. Are the students able to translate their treatment in the classroom to their treatment of clients? We have reason to believe this would be true from parallel process research of supervision (Williams, 1987; Zetzer et al., 2020), however, additional evidence would provide credence to this instructional approach. There is much theoretical and research work in the field of counseling that can be applied to classroom instruction with the goal of creating anti-oppressive, inclusive space (Williams et al., 2021).

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