Teaching Cognitive Complexity with Six Thinking Hats in Counseling Coursework

This teaching brief is an explication of adapting The Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1985) for creative innovation in counselor education and counselor development of cognitive complexity. Autoethnographic research was implemented to systematically study the authors' processes and outcomes of this andragogical teaching practice. The authors have most frequently integrated The Six Thinking Hats into counseling supervision instructional group seminar courses. We provide steps and instructions for integrating this conceptualization tool into diverse supervisory settings.

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This teaching practices manuscript is a delineation of integrating The Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1985; Li et al., 2008) as a creative and innovative andragogical modality for teaching critical conceptualization practices, enhancing critical reflective skills, and supporting cognitive complexity among students of counseling. Within the field of counseling and counselor education, imperatives for critical and ethical decision-making are daily practice necessities for safeguarding client welfare and preserving the longevity of counseling as a self-governing profession (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2023). Cognitive complexity, defined as an "ability to absorb, integrate, and make use of multiple perspectives" (Granello, 2010, p. 92), is a vital capacity supporting counselor acumen and increasing counselor efficacy. Counselor acumen requires skillfulness in critical reflection and reflexivity (Lambie et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2014). The initial educational preparation of professional counselors, across counseling specializations, includes core knowledge as well as regional and topical foci to provide the most efficacious services possible (CACREP, 2016; 2023).

In adopting this andragogical strategy, authors refined the language of the six hats through contemporary adaptations more aligned to multicultural social justice competencies and ethics of the counseling profession. De Bono's (1985) original Six Thinking Hats roles and functions were designed for problem-solving within the business industry. We recognized how de Bono's original book, *The Six Thinking Hats* (1985), was very business-focused and contained some language not aligned to counseling contexts. These Six Thinking Hats are summarized below with modifications that emphasize each hat's role using de Bono's originally named hat colors for reference:

- Data Hat (White Hat) – gathers objective data, facts, and client details
- Feelings Hat (Red Hat) – focuses on subjective data, emotions and feelings, potential areas of countertransference
- Protection Hat (Black Hat) – identifies cautions for counselor and client, areas to protect, ethical concerns
- Strengths Hat (Yellow Hat) – highlights positive aspects, constructive thoughts
- Creativity Hat (Green Hat) – elicits new ideas, generates creative thoughts for clinical work
- Process Hat (Blue Hat) – oversees and facilitates the processing of the other hats, providing summaries

Without ascribing meaning or motivation to de Bono's original work, we recognized that the way people spoke in the 1980s is not reflective of the more humanistic and holistic view of persons and views of interpersonal roles in current counseling paradigms. For example, while

de Bono originally deemed the black hat as the critical thoughts role with power to shoot-down other ideas and potentially shut-down cross-dialog between other hats, a shift in the hat's focus is beneficial in counseling work. In counseling conceptualization, we highlight the power-with, versus power-over, of the black hat as it adds thoughts for client protections and ethical concerns. Reframing the black hat as Protection Hat, can promote powerful conversations with and among other hats regarding client and counselor wellbeing and the therapeutic relationship. Before explicating this andragogical practice, readers may benefit from a brief introduction to foundational scholarship related to the Six Thinking Hats as a developmental approach.

Literature Summary

As a tool for increasing productivity in problem-solving processes, The Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1985) served the function of differential identification and stratification. Using the hats, teams of business professionals could discuss problems and identify solutions by de-fusing fused constructs and illuminating under-emphasized influences. Roughly four years later, de Bono's work emerged in counseling scholarship, on the client intervention side, as a named approach for supporting counselors' conceptualization-refinement and decision-making by promoting reflection, creativity, and adaptive imagination (Gelatt, 1989). In the early 2000s scholars began to discuss the use of The Six Thinking Hats in a range of settings across the globe (Al Jarrah, 2019; Karadag et al., 2009; Li et al., 2008; Moucessian, 2020; Overholser, 2013). Both Overholser's (2013) and Moucessian's (2020) research highlighted perspective-taking as an important emphasis and contribution through the integrated use of The Six Thinking Hats. Authors reflected on two themes of "broadened considerations" and "enhanced participant engagement" that seem to emerge as direct outcomes and/or implications from the collection of reviewed scholarship.

By dividing into six role-based cognitive processes, The Six Thinking Hats are a structured metaphorical framework for individual, paired, and group conceptualization (de Bono, 1985; Kivunja, 2015). When considering learner readiness (Knowles, 1980; Taylor & Baltrinic, 2018) and supervisee development (Stoltenberg et al., 1998), there was no empirical data through which scholars denoted boundaries of utility for introducing the six hats. Mitchell and Butler (2021) named The Six Thinking Hats a useful supervisory intervention approach for Level 2 counselors (a reference to Stoltenberg et al,.1998 Integrative Developmental Model) to support efficiency, organization, collaboration, critical reflection, and cognitive processing depth within supervisory groups. Below, we outline the innovative andragogical strategy that emerged from existing literature and our autoethnographic study of this teaching practice with practicum and internship-level students of counseling.

Andragogical Strategy

As we think about andragogical approaches, utilizing the six hats in client conceptualization work is a modality for facilitating intervention-planning opportunities. As a procedural lesson, once students begin to grasp the role of each hat and how the hats work together, procedural collaboration in learning unfolds. Engagement with the hats, across stages of utilization, includes opportunities for each emerging counselor to cultivate increased perspective-taking practices, and in turn, develop cognitive complexity (Castillo, 2018). Next, we describe instructional stages of inviting students to theoretically consider "What does it take for me, personally, conceptually, cognitively, and emotionally to focus on the hat on my head?" In the following section, we introduce instructional stages of implementing the six thinking hats, describing the overall process for instructors and students. We share descriptions of materials needed to facilitate the andragogical strategy and include ethical considerations and limitations for using the six hats in counselor education.

INSTRUCTIONAL STAGES

Just as one might consider stages of group processes, we offer stages of instruction for utilization of The Six Thinking Hats: Invitation > Acculturation > Cultivation > Integration. *Invitation* is the stage in which the hats are introduced. During this stage, we describe, as thoroughly as possible, each hat and perspectives each hat brings to client conceptualization. Following hat introductions, students are encouraged to identify questions and statements each hat might contribute. Additionally, we invite students to consider which hats seem natural for them, and which hats will take more work for students to wear.

During the Acculturation stage, students are beginning to make sense of each hat, discovering hats that may be aligned with their natural inclinations or pre-existing strengths. It is in this stage we have students select a hat to wear during group client conceptualization, leaving one student to share their client case. In this stage students begin the practice of group deliberation and perspective-taking. Following a brief client introduction by one student counselor, hat-wearing students are then invited by the Process Hat-wearing instructor/facilitator to dialog with the counselor and with one another. A sample dialogue flow might be a) Process Hat dialoguing with counselor presenter, b) Data Hat making observations and inquiries, c) live data streaming of counselor video recording, d) Feelings Hat offering disclosures, e) Strengths Hat sharing exclamations, f) Protection Hat stating declarations, g) Creativity Hat providing feedback, and h) Process Hat providing a summary. As time permits, at the end of the scheduled consultation conversation, the counselor presenter may benefit from briefly recapping their main takeaways gleaned from the six hats discussion and asking any of the six hats any lingering direct questions.

Throughout the Acculturation stage, we tend to notice heightened student anxiety regarding asking questions or making statements that may venture outside of their particular hat's domain. Though this anxiety tends to taper off as students continue to engage in hat use. It is also common in the Acculturation stage for instructors to be intentional in helping reframe questions or comments to align with particular hats and include additional examples for students to learn what might be shared from their hat's perspective.

The *Cultivation* stage is observed as one of rich discoveries and risk taking for learners. In the Cultivation stage, instructors spend less time redirecting students as their contributions, without a set formula, begin to be more aligned with their corresponding hat. Students are able to see how the hats collaborate and begin to speak with one another. As dialogue in the Cultivation stage shifts, instructors, wearing the Process Hat, begin to ask counselor presenters which hat they would like to hear from first, and what hats they might like to speak to one another. The Cultivation stage is where students wearing the Feelings Hat, for example, takes time to name what is coming up for them as well as feelings expressed by the counselor and from the client. In this stage, students start to garner insights from one another and from themselves by their willingness to focus on wearing their assigned or selected hat.

When individual students and supervision groups emerge into the *Integration* stage, instructors can relinquish their macro-Process Hat and share their micro-Process Hat. Once students have integrated the six hats into their solidified skill set, they begin to take ownership of consultations, and instructors can take on more of a professional participant role. As this occurs, instructors can provide feedback to counselor presenters in the form of personal experience and insight. Simultaneously, instructors will observe less need to attend to consultation discussion structures and less redirecting of students' contributions aligned with hats they are wearing. The Integration stage is where meaningful feedback for participants can be shared the majority of consultation time, as all participants have an integrated knowledge of each hat, how each hat relates to one another, and fluid utility of each hat. Integration is what students carry with them after class groups terminate. Students may choose to implement the hats into self-supervision or teach it to other colleagues.

MATERIALS

The following text is a narrative instructional guide like what we provide to students as part of the Invitation stage. We have found giving printed handout reminders to students has been useful. Students are encouraged to keep the guide close-by during supervision sessions, taking ownership of its information, personalizing and adding notes as beneficial.

The *Data Hat* focuses solely on knowledge-gathering, data collection, and historical accounts. This hat considers, "What do we know?" and seeks out missing demographic information, such as concrete facts and figures. The Data Hat listens for information gaps and presents clarifying questions to assist the client consultation (e.g., "How many sessions have you had? What are differential diagnoses for this client?, Does this client have a stable home life?").

The *Feelings Hat* acknowledges and legitimizes emotions. This includes the emotional experiences of the client, counselor, and the Feelings Hat wearer. The Feelings Hat gives voice to affective emotions and physiological sensations that were stimulated for them during client conceptualization discussions. The Feelings Hat asks, "What's coming up for you…?" and shares their observations (e.g. "I noted a sense of sadness in your voice.") and wonderings about client emotionality during sessions (e.g., "I would feel uncomfortable in that situation."). The Feelings Hat is not expected to give reason or justification for subjective feelings. This hat offers reflective space to explore counselor personalization, such as countertransference. The Feelings Hat can be intentionally subjective, does not have to be neutral, and may present as the opposite of the objective Data Hat.

The *Protection Hat* identifies cautions, potential problems, challenges, and/or risks for the client and counselor. These could be related to treatment directions taken with the client and even foundations of how the client conceptualization narrative is presented. The Protection Hat asks about ethical concerns, treatment concerns, barriers, or areas of potential harm in the client's life. This could include, though is not limited to, important historical experiences impacting the current state of the client, systemic structures of oppression, and counselor countertransference considerations. The wearer of the Protection Hat is helping to illuminate potential gaps in critical considerations or limitations to the current client conceptualization including what may be injurious to the client/counselor processes.

The *Strengths Hat* looks for strengths in the client and counselor relationship. The Strengths Hat shares constructive attributes of the counselor's approach as well as positives, benefits, advantages, and strengths (i.e., client and counselor). This hat communicates evidence of hope and feasibility, recognizes supports, and encourages considerations about positive outcomes of what could happen based on existing counselor and client ways of being. The Strengths Hat addresses reframing opportunities and stimulates visions and dreams, with questions such as, "Where do you see hope?"

Most often during the Invitation and Acculturation stages, The Creativity Hat wearer, shares after other hats have spoken. The *Creativity Hat* is the hat that concretely initiates discussions about and responses to consultation inquiries. This hat is most encouraged to 'think outside the box.' This Creativity Hat represents ideas and works to cultivate new options for a counseling direction. Creativity Hats asks, "What haven't you considered before?" Wearing the Creativity Hat involves brainstorming and free association to explore new theoretical lenses and intervention approaches. The Creativity Hat is not expected to know more but actively works to consider and stimulate discussion about new possibilities, alternatives, ideas, and concepts.

The *Process Hat* is responsible for making connections, keeping other hats engaged, giving overviews, stimulating dialogue among hats, and helping identify conclusions. Depending on the instructional approach and stage, The Process Hat asks counselor presenters which hat they need to hear from most. Other Process Hat prompts to the group or individual hats could include, "What is the conclusion?", "Is there anything else that needs to be addressed?", and "How does everything fit together?"

Within this andragogical practice, course instructors are often wearing a macro-Process Hat during early instructional stages, and instructors may be the only Process Hat wearers. However, as students move into the Cultivation and Integration phases of utilizing the Six Hats —as well as knowledge and comfort with having shared power in classroom processes— students discover they can wear the micro-Process Hat with increased ease and efficacy.

Additional materials we share have included wearable "hats" (e.g., small and large-sized plastic bowl hats, mini-fascinators, neckties, tiaras, glasses, etc.) and laminated paper hats of variable styles in which students can choose to hold or place in front of them as a reminder to self and others where their consultation focus is during each client consultation discussion. During virtual supervision sessions, each participant is asked to replace their name with the hat name they are using during consultation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Adaptation of the hats as a conceptualization tool is important modeling. One such modification for group member needs may arise regarding visual needs. Labeling and adding braille to any wearable hats and/or laminated hat handouts for colorblind or visually impaired students can help bridge barriers. Another example of a collaborative modification from Baraka's experience was with a visually impaired student who did not read Braille. The instructor and student collaborated to select objects to represent each of the different hats' domain of focus. The pairing of hat function with objects provided students a strengthened connection beyond the verbal assignments of hat colors and roles while learning this conceptualization framework. Similarly, broaching classroom discussions regarding how racism-based colors have been used to stereotype, degrade, and marginalize people is an important acknowledgement we make during the Invitation stage to differentiate the purpose of color-association as a memory support mechanism. Instructors can make color re-association choices before the Invitation stage with students. However, we have found that broaching the conversation has been sufficient differentiation practices to eliminate potential racism-based triggering for students.

Studying Effectiveness

In implementing this theoretically-sound andragogical strategy, we also sought to study the efficacy of our implementation, as described herein. Research on the utilization of The Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1985; Li et al., 2008) in counseling is limited; and to date, no other scholars had explored counselors' use of the Six Hats within group supervision. Adjacent to this andragogical autoethnographic study, we conducted an exploratory multiple case study on uses of The Six Thinking Hats with four different groups of master's-level practicum counselors enrolled in two different CACREP-accredited counselor education programs in the

midwestern United States: This article includes methods of studying the teaching strategy utilized for that study.

As teachers consistently engaged in researcher roles, autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2010; Poulos, 2021) was a clear study design choice for our andragogical innovation work. Embarking on an autoethnographic journey, required intentional documentation (Ellis et al., 2010; Poulos 2021) during each phase of our individual, and paired, course preparation and instructional delivery. While the andragogical strategy of our evolved six hats was implemented during three semesters of four master-level practicum group supervision seminar courses, the study of our strategy occurred in the waking hours and sometimes the attempting-to-sleep hours each day between November 2021 and December 2023. We sought mutual Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval once student participant data collection for the multiple case study of the Six Hats utilization was designed. However, at both of our institutions, autoethnographic research was considered exempt from requiring IRB approval. As such, the timeframe between study design to autoethnographic data collection was relatively instantaneous.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Intentional and rigorous autoethnographic study requires researcher commitment, mindfulness, and intrapersonal attunement (Poulos, 2021). Our data collection included recordings of our planning and processing conversations before and at the end of each semester, individual written and verbal reflective journaling, field notes (e.g., notations made in the margin of a printed syllabus; a stack of notecard reminders that guided weekly supervision sessions). For example, while walking to a local coffee shop, after a departmental meeting in which one of us presented on The Six Thinking Hats use in higher education classrooms, a colleague's questions regarding the oppressive undertones of the Black Hat prompted a critically reflective voice note to the other as part of data collected and ongoing dialogue of formative instructional refinements to the Six Hats as an andragogical strategy. Also, artifact analysis (i.e., six hats student handout, client presentation guide sheets, and course syllabi) was conducted in tandem to reflect on our anecdotal observations of student responses to instructional artifacts. We used open coding analysis (Poulos, 2021; Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013) to analyze each component of data we collected. Intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) was used to glean trustworthy conclusions about these autoethnographic study outcomes.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Where inter-rater reliability can be a concern in many quantitative studies, the trustworthiness of our autoethnographic study was strengthened by having more than one researcher-participant with whom to engage and corroborate fidelity of self-member checking (Ellis et al., 2010). In conducting this autoethnography, we employed integrated processes of self-member checking at regular intervals of data collection processes. This was an asset to the credibility of implications, being able to self-code and cross-code data collected by and from

each other. It was our experience, observation, and hope that readers will be able to confirm transferability of our study outcomes.

OUTCOMES

Counselor Educator supervisors of master's-level practicum counselors use various informal, formal, formative, and summative evaluation processes as a part of effective andragogical practices (Borders & Brown, 2005; Knowles, 1980; Taylor & Baltrinic, 2018). We discovered that when integrating the Six Hats as an andragogical approach, supervisors, simultaneously functioning as evaluating educators, can be more effective evaluators when engaged in real-time reflexivity and integrating action-based teaching principles. This translates to supervisors functioning as an intermediary between the concrete structures of the six hats and the abstract manifestation of student utilization during experiential supervisory lessons. Instructional supervisors serve as both a macro- and meta-Process Hat wearer within classroom processes (Baraka & Hart, 2023). Instructors are facilitating a supervisory process while teaching a supervisory process (metamodeling; Borders & Brown, 2005). In real-time, educators can evaluate efficacy of instruction through observations of student-counselors' persistence and engagement with the Six Hats as well as observed fluidity, ease, and depth of processing content across various hats. From study outcomes, we noted that, within any given course semester, opportunities for students to wear each hat for a minimum of two instances was sufficient to support instructor evaluation of instructional efficacy. Of course, the more objectively concrete evaluation metrics are at the outset of implementing any teaching strategy, the more effective and accurate the instructor evaluation can be (Knowles, 1980; Malott et al., 2014; Tate et al., 2014).

Assessing Student Outcomes

Evaluation of teaching strategy efficacy and assessment of student learning are related parallel processes, though not synonymous, and are not always correlated. Several counselor dispositions and skills related to personalization, conceptualization, intervention, and ethics are assessed throughout counselor education programs (CACREP, 2016; CACREP, 2023). The mode of assessment for practicum courses is heavily based on observable implementation with clients and students' articulation of thinking during consultation and supervisory experiences (CACREP, 2023; Tate et al., 2014). Assessment developers and teacher education theorists (Knowles, 1980; Lambie et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2014) warned that the more objective and specific an assessment tool is designed at the outset, the more distinct feedback can be communicated.

Based on existing literature (Al Jarrah, 2019; Kivunja, 2015; Li et al., 2008; Mitchell & Butler, 2021), implementation of The Six Thinking Hats aligned well for assessing student perspective-

taking, collaboration, cognitive complexity, and depth of critical thinking. We found that implementation of the Six Hats could also support some related constructs of student assessment, such as demonstrating vulnerability, contributing to *brave spaces*, and facilitating safe spaces in learning environments. As described above, a consistent and clear foundation of learner expectations for engaging in respective learning experiences and engagement with aligned assessment mechanisms (e.g., practice demonstrations, reflective writing prompts, conceptualization reports, clinical documentation) is paramount for establishing appropriate and useful assessment methods. Specific recommendation for student assessment tools is beyond the scope of this brief; nevertheless, the considerations above are essential for effective assessment of counseling student outcomes.

Implications and Delimitations

We hypothesized that this andragogical practice can be beneficial for both novice and advanced counselor educators. We recognize that what was inventive and innovative in 1985 remains useful in the 21st century for counseling supervisors with evolved adaptations discussed in this article. One specific adaptation to note is how supervisors or instructors seeking to use the Six Hats as a supervisory tool can best approach it by decentering the questions. For example, in our adaptation, the Data Hat is not the one who brings the problem or question of focus, which was part of de Bono's (1985) framework, but rather the person, pair, or group looks together at client conceptualizations. We have found that this approach allows for more collective engagement in conceptualization. This also provides a space for a more collaborative voice to emerge as each counselor, no matter the number of participants, knows how they can contribute and what is being asked of them within the scope of conceptualization conversations.

We recognized early in using the Six Hats that student comprehension processes evolved at different paces. Even though we sought to be as explicit as possible with explanations of each hats' focus, we were able to use the hats as both a benchmark and a guide throughout supervision. Utilizing the hats gave us, as instructors, visible tools to note when a student had difficulty moving beyond Data Hat content or found it challenging to identify Feelings Hat responses to client sessions. The hats were helpful for illuminating insights into what more formal supervisory work might be needed with students and were concrete examples of what kinds of assistance students might need in further developing skills.

FUTURE STUDY

As we consider areas for future study, limited literature on the uses of The Six Thinking Hats as a client conceptualization tool warrants further exploration in counselor education beyond supervision. Introducing the hats as a conceptualization tool in assessment or mental health

disorders courses could introduce students to its use in diagnosis and treatment planning. More specifically, research questions focused on interpersonal processing of the hats would provide insight as to how emerging counselors are making connections to hats during each instructional stage outlined in this brief. Additionally, studies that explore questions such as What do counselors need to effectively wear the Process Hat?, What is my immediate/natural hat inclination?, and How does the shared language of the Six Hats foster more accurate client conceptualization conversations within group practice? could provide further evaluation of the intricacies and effectiveness of the Six Hats as a supervisory tool used in counselor education classrooms.

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