

Using Activism to Transform Sociopolitical Crises in Counselor Education

In the following brief, we introduce a three-part trauma-informed and social justice-framed activity called Reflective Activism in Counseling Practice. The activity guides students through (a) reflective expression, exploring positionality through creativity, (b) a critical-action project, analyzing systems and translating critique into an activism project, and (c) collective engagement, sharing work through nontraditional formats, like gallery walks, dialogue circles, and collaborative art. This work is grounded in American Counseling Association (ACA) ethical standards (2014) and advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2003), and positions counselor education and training as an active, healing-centered process that validates students' experiences while preparing them to resist neutrality in the face of oppression.

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Introduction

Counseling students do not arrive at educational spaces as blank canvases. They bring with them lived experiences and a clear awareness of today's crises, including mass deportations, anti-trans legislation, attacks on reproductive rights, and ongoing global violence. When counselor educators present the classroom as an apolitical or neutral space, they risk deepening students' sense of despair, further marginalizing students whose identities and experiences are directly shaped by sociopolitical forces (Walker, 2018). In this way, neutrality functions not as impartiality but as complicity (Watson, 2019), reinforcing systemic harm.

Because counseling students are already navigating sociopolitical realities and systemic inequities that affect their well-being, a trauma-informed lens is required to meet their needs (Bitanihirwe & Imad, 2023). Such an approach helps educators recognize how these forces shape both classroom learning and the ways students will eventually engage with clients. Pedagogical practices that integrate activism with trauma-informed principles can create learning environments that prepare students for professional practice while minimizing the risk of retraumatization (Carello & Butler, 2015). Furthermore, by preparing students to engage critically with sociopolitical crises, counselor educators reject false neutrality and fulfill their ethical mandate to advance social justice.

How Traditional Counseling Curricula Can Silence Context and Disempower Students

Traditional counseling curricula often unintentionally marginalize students by minimizing the cultural, historical, and systemic realities that shape their lives (Goodman et al., 2015; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004). Rooted in dominant Eurocentric epistemologies such as individualism, rationalism, and empiricism, counselor education frequently privileges individual adjustment over structural critique, encouraging students to help clients adapt to systems that may perpetuate racism, poverty, migration stress, and other forms of oppression (Marsella & Pedersen, 2004). This narrow orientation reflects what Wrenn (1962) termed cultural encapsulation, in which counseling defines reality through a single dominant cultural lens, while disregarding alternative worldviews. As a result, students are insufficiently prepared to recognize cultural and systemic inequities (Marsella & Pederson, 2004). For students already attuned to these inequities, counselor education may feel disconnected from both their lived realities and those of the clients they hope to serve.

These limitations are reinforced by pedagogical methods that privilege passivity over critical engagement. Many counseling programs continue to rely on a banking model of teaching

(Freire, 2000), in which students are expected to absorb and reproduce information rather than critique it (Goodman et al., 2014). Within this framework, multiculturalism and social justice discourse are often isolated into a single course or Activity, signaling that diversity is supplemental rather than foundational (Dameron et al., 2020). Although frameworks, such as the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competence (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016), remain central to the field, they can leave students underprepared to recognize subtler forms of oppression, including microaggressions, heteronormativity, and unexamined privilege that shape both their own experiences and those of their future clients (Goodman et al., 2014). Even contemporary moves toward inclusive risk reinforce assimilation by privileging neutrality, efficiency, and dominant forms of knowledge while marginalizing cultural perspectives that challenge existing systems (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2022).

These concerns become especially urgent in the current political and social climate, where global crises, discrimination, and political conflict directly affect students' lives. Yet counselor education often continues to emphasize individual coping while leaving systemic inequities unnamed, contributing to distress, disengagement, and silence within the classroom (MindSet Safety Management, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Increasing restrictions on discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and oppression further narrow opportunities for critical dialogue, silencing the very perspectives students most need to be validated (Habteselasse & LaFrance, 2025). To address these challenges, counselor education must be reimagined through trauma-informed pedagogy and reflective activism. Together, these approaches center students' needs by providing spaces where they can process the weight of the world around them, find agency amid harm, and cultivate strength, resilience, and insight that will sustain both their personal lives and their future work with clients.

Introducing a Framework for Reflective Activism in Counselor Education

Counselor education is not only about developing clinical competence but also about shaping professionals who can navigate the intersections of systemic oppression, personal identity, and client care. When counselor education focuses exclusively on skills and knowledge, it risks overlooking how oppression shapes both clients' lived experiences and counselors' professional development (Ratts et al., 2016; Sharma & Hipolito-Delgado, 2021). To address this gap, we propose a framework that utilizes reflective activism as the core of activity design. Reflective activism integrates critical self-examination with action, encouraging students to engage in sociopolitical issues while also examining their own assumptions, identities, and responsibilities within systems of power (Buluk & Carnicelli, 2015). In this way, classroom teaching becomes a deliberate and necessary act of preparing counselors to respond with courage, intentionality, and compassion in a polarized world.

Within counselor education, reflective activism aligns closely with trauma-informed and action-based pedagogy (Boluk & Carnicelli, 2015). Trauma-informed pedagogy acknowledges the impact of systemic and political violence on students' well-being. At the same time, action-based learning creates opportunities for them to confront and analyze these realities rather than adjust to them uncritically. Together, they align with reflective activism to resist silencing, validate diverse ways of knowing, and empower students to connect personal growth with advocacy and systemic change. DeBlaere et al. (2014) demonstrated how multiple forms of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, and heterosexism) contribute to psychological distress, underscoring that oppression is not an abstract concept but a lived experience with tangible psychological consequences. Their findings further suggest that resilience can buffer the effects of discrimination, reframing resilience as a process of transforming harm into agency. Classroom practices such as reflective journaling with identity papers or structuring discussions that invite students to analyze systemic inequities can support this process by helping students connect personal experiences to broader sociopolitical contexts.

Activism itself can function as a healing and growth-oriented practice (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). For example, Strauss Swanson and Szymanski (2020) found that activism helped survivors of sexual assault move from silence and shame to agency, finding voice and meaning in ways that foster both individual and collective transformation. Participants described healing through challenging rape culture, educating others, and participating in movements. One of them is #MeToo, the survivor-support movement founded by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and amplified into a global hashtag in 2017. These experiences fostered validation, solidarity, leadership, empathy, and self-worth. These findings position reflective activism not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a model for ethical counseling practice. By integrating reflection, advocacy, and trauma-informed engagement into the classroom, counselor educators can prepare students to respond to clients and communities with greater critical awareness, compassion, and commitment to social justice. Taken together, reflective activism represents both a healing practice and an educational strategy.

AUTHOR REFLEXIVITY

As counselor educators, we approach this work from our own situated positions. The first author identifies as a White settler in the United States with middle-class, able-bodied, and cisgender privilege; her neurodivergent identity has served as an invitation to embrace imperfection and messiness as practices of anti-violence and resistance to institutionally perpetuated harm. Her work bridges the worlds of counseling and anti-violence activism, responding to relational violence by working with people who have experienced abuse as well as those who engage in abusive behaviors. The second author identifies as a white, queer, cisgender, non-disabled man. His work centers on advocacy for and with clients and students with non-dominant affective and gender identities, and values modeling challenging discourse in counselor education classrooms. We recognize that our investment in this framework stems from our encounters with sociopolitical realities across many roles: as educators navigating

increasingly politicized academic spaces, as clinicians witnessing systemic harm to clients, and as individuals holding both privilege and marginalization in complex, intersecting ways.

GROUNDING IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY

While activism can catalyze healing and transformation, it also draws attention to the realities that students bring into the classroom. When educators introduce topics such as violence, oppression, and trauma, students may not simply be analyzing theory but re-encountering personal or communal wounds. For many, academic spaces can therefore become sites of re-traumatization (Bitanirwe & Imad, 2023). Bitanirwe and Imad (2023) contended that trauma-informed pedagogy cannot be treated as optional or peripheral but is an ethical imperative, as universities are charged with safeguarding student dignity, well-being, and equitable access to learning; given the nature of academic content, educators must prioritize safety, inclusion, and empowerment alongside intellectual rigor.

Trauma-informed pedagogy reframes the role of faculty from being mere content deliverers to becoming partners in learning. Rather than functioning as gatekeepers of information, professors are positioned as co-regulators whose presence and empathy help students navigate distress and stay engaged. In this way, faculty do more than teach; they model resilience by demonstrating balance, practicing self- and collective care, and showing appropriate vulnerability. Moreover, when professors share their own challenges, they normalize the idea that resilience is not innate but cultivated, offering students a realistic and hopeful model (Arbour et al., 2024).

The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) positions advocacy and social justice as core professional values, emphasizing counselors' responsibility to advocate for clients (ACA, 2014, A.7.a), support student welfare (ACA, 2014, F.8.a), and to infuse cultural discourse into education (ACA, 2014, F.7.c). Similarly, the ACA Advocacy Competencies (ACA, 2018) frame advocacy as central to counselor identity by encouraging practitioners to address systemic barriers across individual, community, and policy levels. Within this ethical framework, activism can be understood not only as a professional responsibility but also as a healing practice. Because many counseling students carry the effects of systemic harm through lived experience, vicarious exposure, or work with marginalized communities, unaddressed social realities can contribute to overwhelm, disengagement, or retraumatization in the classroom. Integrating reflective activism into pedagogy creates opportunities for students to process these experiences through critical dialogue, transforming emotional burden into meaning-making, empowerment, and purposeful advocacy.

Description of the Activity

Title: *Reflective Activism in Counseling Practice*

Introduction

This activity is designed to intentionally engage students in current sociopolitical reflection while cultivating counselor identities grounded in trauma-informed practice and reflective activism. As future counselors, students will encounter clients whose lives are deeply shaped by systemic inequities and political realities. Neutrality in these contexts is not neutral; it risks complicity with oppression. By engaging in this work, students will critically examine their own positionality, reflect on systemic patterns across institutions, and channel that awareness into creative, activist-oriented action. The final stage emphasizes collective engagement, sharing projects in relational, nontraditional formats that prioritize dialogue, healing, and mutual reflection.

Benefits

Engaging in this activity offers several potential benefits. Students may deepen their self-awareness by exploring how their identities, privileges, and vulnerabilities intersect with sociopolitical realities. They may experience professional growth as they practice integrating advocacy and activism into their counselor identity, in alignment with ACA ethics and competencies. By engaging in collective dialogue, students can experience solidarity and validation, strengthening community connection and shared meaning-making. Just as importantly, the flexible, creative format encourages expression through art, storytelling, or multimedia approaches that resist traditional academic constraints and allow for more authentic voices to emerge.

Risks

At the same time, this work carries potential risks. Because it engages with real-world crises such as racism, anti-trans violence, and deportations, students may experience emotional distress or find that personal or collective trauma surfaces in unexpected ways. Sharing creative or personal reflections may feel vulnerable, even in nontraditional, community-based formats. Classroom dialogue may reveal power dynamics surrounding differences in privilege, identity, or lived experiences. Students may also experience activism fatigue, as advocacy can be emotionally taxing without adequate self-care and community support. Finally, marginalized students may face the risk of tokenization, feeling pressured to speak from identity rather than choice.

To mitigate these risks, the activity emphasizes choice and agency at every stage: students select the modality of their reflection, the scope of their activism project, and the format of community engagement. Faculty should provide content warnings, grounding practices, and

structured peer support to minimize retraumatization and offer private submission options for those who find sharing publicly unsafe.

Learning Activity Components

The learning activity unfolds across three interconnected stages that center on reflection, systemic critique, activism, and collective engagement in relation to a current sociopolitical issue that they will carry through each stage of the Activity. In Part I, students begin with reflective expression by exploring their identities, lived experiences, and positionality in relation to a current sociopolitical issue. Rather than prioritizing disclosure, the activity emphasizes choiceful, authentic self-expression through creative modalities such as collage, painting, digital art, storytelling, poetry, music, movement, podcast-style recordings, and short videos. Students are encouraged to reflect on how the issue intersects with their own lives, communities, values, and developing identities as counselors. This stage invites students to consider the emotions, tensions, and areas of growth that emerge as they examine themselves in relation to broader social and political realities, while validating lived experience as a meaningful source of knowledge and insight.

In Part II, students engage in a critical-action project that combines systemic analysis with intentional activism. Building on the issue they explored in Part I, students combine systemic analysis with intentional activism. They examine how institutions such as education, healthcare, media, religion, or government perpetuate, ignore, or distort that issue. They are encouraged to analyze how silence, neutrality, or “business as usual” can reinforce inequity and marginalization, while considering whose voices and ways of knowing are validated or dismissed. Students then translate this critique into a small but meaningful activism project aligned with their identities and values. Examples may include creating a zine or infographic, recording a podcast episode, facilitating a dialogue circle, developing a community resource toolkit, or contributing to collective storytelling or art projects. Rather than producing a formal academic paper, students briefly document their process, challenges, and learning through flexible formats such as visual journals, audio reflections, or illustrated notes.

In Part III, students share their work with peers in their class cohort through collective engagement practices that emphasize community dialogue and shared meaning-making rather than performance or evaluation anxiety. Instead of a traditional presentation, students participate in interactive formats such as gallery walks, dialogue circles, living libraries, collective murals, or resource exchanges. For example, students may display artwork, infographics, or QR-linked resources for peers to explore and respond to, engage classmates in small-group discussions about their projects, or contribute pieces of their work to a larger collaborative mural representing the cohort’s collective reflections. Some students may also create take-away materials such as mini-zines, reflection cards, or digital resources that classmates can use beyond the course. Together, these activities encourage collective witnessing, foster deeper

dialogue, and reinforce the connection between personal reflection, systemic awareness, and advocacy-oriented action.

Application to Counselor Education and Ethical Considerations

To apply this activity within counselor education, it is essential to recognize the multidimensional realities that students bring into the classroom. Indeed, students arrive as whole people who bring lived experiences, cultural identities, and an awareness of ongoing sociopolitical crises. This activity addresses those realities by providing a structured opportunity for students to reflect on how sociopolitical forces shape both their personal lives and their professional formation.

This activity embodies the principles outlined in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), which identifies advocacy, social justice, and honoring diversity as core professional values. By engaging students in reflective activism, the activity supports student well-being by embedding trauma-informed practices and helping future counselors recognize systemic barriers and advocate in ways that are congruent with their ethical identity. Ultimately, this activity positions counselor education as an active, justice-oriented process rather than a neutral transmission of knowledge.

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

For this activity to succeed, counselor educators must approach implementation with intentional scaffolding and trauma-informed pedagogy beginning on the first day of class (or before). Faculty can support students by providing clear guidance and multiple flexible options for expression, allowing each student to select modalities that feel safe and authentic. Because the material may trigger strong emotions or resurface trauma, it is essential to implement class check-ins, provide options for anonymous feedback (e.g., Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, Qualtrics), and offer structured peer support before and after engagement activities.

Faculty modeling is also key. When educators share their experiences navigating sociopolitical realities and advocating in professional contexts, they normalize vulnerability and demonstrate resilience. Partnerships with campus or community organizations can deepen the activism component, creating opportunities for authentic engagement beyond the classroom. Finally, faculty should consistently highlight self-care and community-care practices, reinforcing that reflective activism is not only a professional responsibility but also a protective strategy against burnout and compassion fatigue.

NAVIGATING RESTRICTIVE CONTEXTS

Counselor educators implementing this activity must attend to the realities of varied institutional and political climates. In states or universities where social justice activism, diversity discussions, or advocacy are discouraged or explicitly restricted by policy, both students and faculty face genuine risks, including professional consequences, surveillance, or retaliation. To prioritize student safety, educators should offer anonymity for reflective components, including the option to submit work privately to the instructor rather than in public or group formats. The activity may be adapted to emphasize internal reflection and professional identity development, or client-centered advocacy resources when public activism is not feasible, preserving the activity's core learning goals while remaining responsive to context.

At the same time, responsibility for justice-oriented counselor education cannot rest solely on individual faculty members. Leadership in higher education fundamentally shapes not only which practices are encouraged but also which conversations are implicitly permitted or discouraged within the classroom (Phillips & Hammond, 2023). When academic leadership fails to engage actively, it not only hinders classroom practice but also signals to faculty that addressing current events, systemic oppression, or sociopolitical factors affecting students may be professionally unsafe. Thus, the capacity to implement trauma-informed, justice-oriented counselor education depends on leadership that centers the needs of the profession and the students it serves rather than on institutional risk aversion.

EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

Evaluating this activity is best approached through a competency-based framework rather than traditional grading metrics rooted in colonized educational systems. Because the purpose of reflective activism is to foster self-awareness, systemic understanding, and agency, assessment should emphasize students' willingness to engage in reflection and critical self-examination. A tiered model (e.g., below competency, competency, intermediate competency, and advanced competency) allows faculty to evaluate growth along a developmental continuum rather than through binary measures of success or failure.

This approach shifts evaluation away from traditional performance metrics and toward developmental growth and improvement. It acknowledges that students enter counselor education at different stages in their sociopolitical and cultural awareness, and that the objective measure of effectiveness lies in their willingness to engage, capacity for reflection, and progress along the continuum of development (For more information on competency-based frameworks, see Fischer & Fischer, 2024; Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Wambui, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELOR EDUCATION / FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This activity has significant implications for counselor education, as it challenges programs to cultivate critical consciousness as a practice. It reframes the classroom as a relational,

justice-oriented space where advocacy, activism, and healing are interwoven with professional training. Future directions could include expanding the project into a semester- or term-long portfolio, in which students engage with multiple sociopolitical issues over time, allowing for deeper exploration and sustained activism. Partnering with community organizations could further embed the activism component, extending the impact beyond academic settings and creating opportunities for real-world advocacy.

The activity also holds potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration with fields such as social work, education, or public health, broadening institutional critique and supporting interdisciplinary approaches to justice.

LIMITATIONS

While this activity offers meaningful opportunities, it is not without limitations. Because it engages with real-world sociopolitical crises, some students may experience emotional distress or find that personal and collective trauma surfaces in ways that are difficult to manage within an academic course. Institutional contexts may also limit what can be openly discussed; in restrictive political climates, both students and faculty may encounter pushback when addressing controversial or politically charged topics. The activity's nontraditional, creative design, while inclusive, may challenge students more familiar with conventional academic structures and require additional scaffolding and clarity from faculty. Furthermore, evaluating diverse modalities of expression (e.g., art, storytelling, and advocacy projects) can pose challenges to maintaining consistent grading, requiring faculty to be particularly attentive to equity and transparency. Finally, there remains the risk of activism fatigue or tokenization, particularly for marginalized students who may already be carrying disproportionate advocacy burdens. These limitations underscore the importance of ongoing faculty support, institutional advocacy, and a commitment to trauma-informed, student-centered pedagogy. We also want to be direct: where this assignment could realistically threaten a faculty member's job, safety, or immigration status, full implementation is not an ethical obligation. Faculty may legitimately adapt it heavily, defer it, or decline it. Choosing self-protection in the face of a genuine threat is not a failure of advocacy; remaining in the profession is itself a precondition for sustained advocacy.

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