

Adventure Based Counseling Workshop: reflecting upon my experience and future applications (Sample)

The Adventure Based Counseling workshop provided an amazing opportunity to examine a group's development in the context of adventure. There are two important things I have taken away from the workshop: 1) progression through the workshop as a group can signify the development of an individual (client) in counseling; thus, adventure may be able to facilitate the counseling process 2) within a short amount of time, adventure activities can strengthen group cohesion and provide a trusting support system that can foster personal/professional growth.

The Group Experience: how it parallels the counseling process

Although the entire group was made up of working adults who voluntarily attended the workshop, in many ways, my experience (and my observations of others in the group) represent the counseling process. The fact that eleven people who come together as strangers but leave as friends in such a short amount of time is in itself an indicator of growth, both personal and interpersonal. From my observations, the personal growth that occurred at the workshop is very similar to the personal growth that transpires in the counseling process. The following observation of my first day at the workshop conveys the struggle that someone in counseling may experience during their initial sessions. For instance, feelings of uncertainty, fear, and reluctance are one's initial reactions to the counseling process. The uncertainty of what to expect from the workshop and the other participants resulted in feeling uncomfortable and out of place, similar to a client.

Anyone observing our behaviors would be able to guess that it was Day 1 of the workshop. Breakfast was used as a way to avoid the awkwardness that always initially exists between strangers. In between chewing, sipping coffee, and gazing out the window onto the beautiful grounds, there was pressure to try to connect with the strangers sitting around you. It's not that it was difficult thinking of questions--I had plenty of questions. For instance, I was curious about what brought each person to the workshop, what they expected to get out of it, and what advice they could give me about finding counseling jobs that incorporated experiential learning. Despite this, somehow it was still difficult getting a conversation going.

Finally, when it was time for registration, we didn't have to worry about talking to each other. I was relieved to have an activity that saved us from the having to make awkward conversation. Luckily, we were not awkwardly divided into teams. Rather, a "team" meant whoever was currently sitting at your table. This easy game allowed me to stop worrying about what to talk about. Instead, it created light conversation and laughter.

The uneasiness was reduced by the introduction of a game that relieved the pressure to converse and consequently loosened everyone up, which led to more natural conversations. Similarly, a

counselor may have to reduce the pressure for the client to disclose personal issues; building rapport through less threatening conversations may need to be utilized.

A simple exercise of folding our arms differently than we're use to was a great way of showing how difficult it is to change even the smallest habit in our lives. At the workshop, this "awkward" feeling was a metaphor for how uncomfortable it may be to try new things and how willing we were to invest in an uncomfortable feeling in order to learn something from it. This same metaphor could be applied to a client in counseling—taking steps to achieve goals can be difficult, but if you're willing to make the effort and stick it out it, the uncomfortable feeling may go away.

Incorporating Adventure into Counseling: why it makes sense

The group at the workshop progressed from being strangers, uncomfortable with sharing and trusting, to being friends, comfortable enough to challenge each other, be honest with each other, and trust each other. These different levels of comfort are what I sense a client in counseling goes through. In addition, after attending the workshop and making this observation I am even more convinced that adventure could play a more important and more therapeutic role. An environment such as this is conducive to counseling in that it offers people a chance to learn through experiences, make observations about themselves, generalize lessons to real life issues, and take what one has learned in a safe environment and apply it to a real life situation. Therefore, an application that I intend on pursuing in the future is how to incorporate adventure more directly into counseling. From my discussions with others in the group it seems that there is still a separation between formal counseling/therapy and adventure programming.

On the first day, a lot of ice breakers were used, which successfully loosened us up. As I learned, however, there are some other important consequences of using ice breakers: 1) laughter calms nerves, which automatically brings people closer together and 2) depending on how you frame a game/initiative/challenge, it can convey a very meaningful message. On the surface, they were simply ice breakers, but depending on how it was used, a simple ice breaker could convey important messages. For instance, in "Gotcha", where you try to simultaneously grab a person's finger while escaping their grasp, metaphors about our experience as a participant, professional, and caring for self and others while in the workshop were incorporated and discussed. When that happened, suddenly the ice breaker took on a different meaning. The invaluable lesson I learned from this is that each activity can be used multiple times with various groups and can convey different messages and create different meanings for each participant. This is just one example of how effective experiential learning can be, especially within the area of counseling.

Using Adventure to Strengthen Group Cohesion and Teach Counseling Concepts

The second observation, that adventure activities strengthen group cohesiveness within a short period of time, has lead me to believe that using adventure programming for first year graduate counseling students could facilitate their personal and professional growth. Adventure activities

could promote group support, something that is difficult to achieve when you are a new student in an unfamiliar program. Especially when students begin their practicum and internships, having support is important. Many students experience feelings of self-doubt throughout the program, especially during initial counseling experiences with clients. Therefore, having a group of people who understand what you are through and who are able to offer you support is essential for the development of a professional counselor. It is also a practice they should get use to doing since consult with other professionals will become a part of their career. Also, being able to experience challenges (i.e. leap of faith, pamper pull) can serve as a metaphor for what future clients of students may be going through in their lives. The framing and debriefing that could be done with adventure activities could serve as a great way to demonstrate basic counseling concepts that are addressed the first year of graduate school (i.e. building rapport/trust, resistance, setting goals/experiencing set backs, level of readiness for change). Unlike my first observation, this will be applied immediately in the form of a proposal to the Counseling Education department at Saint Bonaventure University.

Lessons about the Counseling Process for Graduate Students

The concepts emphasized the first day of the workshop were: creating a community using ice breakers and metaphors, addressing anxieties (speaking your truth), thinking about how it applies to us now, and realizing the importance of being playful. The first day, although it started out uncomfortable, quickly evolved into a fun, non-threatening environment. The importance of creating a non-threatening environment for a client is also one of the first things you do as a counselor.

Breakfast the second morning could define day 2 of the workshop because everyone was sitting at the same table, despite the tight fit, and comfortably eating and chatting—our group was bonding and it was no longer a forced effort. The concepts that were emphasized day 2 were how to define our personal expectations for the workshop and how to maintain that comfortableness in the midst of change.

We immediately jumped into a team initiative that revealed how well we as a group and as individuals dealt with change. This was a great moment because it showed how much we had developed as a group within such a short amount of time. For instance, even the “quiet” people in the group were willing to speak up and share their thoughts (during and after the activity). It was a little chaotic, but we were still having fun. After the debriefing about how it felt to handle change individually and as a group, it was time for our second team initiative: filling a bucket of balls from outside a perimeter. We easily set a goal of how many balls we expected to fill the bucket up with, but the strategy to go about this is where people began to challenge each other, a moment that indicated our comfortableness with each other. This segued into a discussion about setting goals and overcoming obstacles. Succeeding in these challenges reinforced that our group was strong; therefore we remained positive and continued to become more and more

comfortable with trusting each other. In the initial stages counseling clients may take steps to achieve goals and after succeeding may have a renewed confidence. The lesson for counseling students, therefore, could be to set achievable goals in order to facilitate positive growth.

The concepts of day 3 and 4 were: establishing the real “us” and taking what you learned and applying it elsewhere. When we participated in trust activities (i.e. trust falls, wind in the willows, etc.) it was clear that we had developed into a group that trusted and cared about each other’s well being. Everyone took seriously the safety risks and everyone listened to the difficulty some people had with falling or being touched. This level of honesty and respect indicated to me that we had matured as a group. It also implies that trust is something you constantly have to gain, especially within counseling.

The *real us* was established this day. We were a group that could have fun with each other but could also challenge each other by sharing our opinions openly. This was evident in a team initiative that resulted in us disagreeing on many issues regarding the process of achieving a goal in a low element. I was surprised at how long it took for us to accomplish the task. Our facilitator had given us so much freedom and we had all become leaders that we disagreed on many things which prevented us from efficiently accomplishing the goal as was done in previous initiatives. Instead of this being a sign of weakness, however, I viewed it as a sign of growth because on the first day we would have never felt comfortable enough or trust anyone enough to speak our minds. We were also at the point where we were close enough and strong enough as a group to listen to criticism without becoming upset and without it weakening the group. This is a great example of how challenges help people grow. It also signifies the ups and downs that can occur within the counseling process.

Day 4 came fast and although I knew this group of people would most likely never be together again, I knew that what we had learned together would stay with me when I went back to my own world. It was a strange feeling to suddenly have the workshop end just at the point when you felt the closest to everyone. Just like us, a client eventually has to leave therapy and use the skills they learned in the real world.

Group Cohesion: advantages of a support system

At one point during day 2 we were asked to find “goal partners”. The support within the group strengthened as we found ourselves being comfortable enough to share our goals. Within a short amount of time, we felt comfortable giving each other feedback. The point at which we were able to maintain our humor and have seriousness moments was when I knew we had strengthened as a group. We also were able to motivate each other. There were a couple times throughout the day when our “check-ins” revealed decreasing energy levels. As the day continued we grew more tired. Knowing that each person was willing to continue in a positive way was a motivation in itself.

Noticeable developments of our group cohesion were that instead of using humor as a means to “break the ice”, it became a genuine development of our interactions with one another; it was not something that was forced, but rather something that just happened. Much like the natural development of eating all of our meals together was the natural development of hanging out with each other after formal training was over. Suddenly, it seemed as if we had been long lost friends. We naturally drifted into conversation and played board games. If it weren’t for the activities throughout the day, I believe that either none of this would have happened or it would have happened very slowly.

Conclusion

In many ways I feel that my experience in the workshop parallels the counseling process. For instance, when you first meet a client your focus is gathering information and building rapport. Slowly, trust develops and you are able to discuss goals and take steps to achieve them. There are ups and downs; some goals are achieved, some have to be reevaluated. Then there may be a level of comfort and a sense of achievement but you have to push yourself to the next level in order to grow and learn more. Obstacles may arise and discomfort may result but in addition to external support, there is a new sense of confidence that urges you to push on. Finally, goals are achieved, new skills are learned, and the feeling of success and desire for change are the tools needed to continue without as much support as required initially. Throughout the workshop I wondered how to make the connection between counseling and adventure stronger. Indeed the very concept of adventure, being open to new and challenging experiences within a supportive environment, fits in with the concept of counseling. However, through my discussion with people at the workshop, it seems the role of a licensed counselor is more supervisory. I wish to someday develop a program that allows licensed counselors to conduct counseling using adventure.

A more immediate application of what I have learned could benefit Counseling Education students. The curriculum for graduate students could be enhanced by providing an adventure program that emphasizes important counseling concepts. For instance, games and initiatives could demonstrate the client’s point of view of building trust/rapport, setting goals, and dealing with challenges. It could also, however, serve as a great opportunity to provide an environment for students to develop their own self-concept and to gain support from other students. It is highly recommended that students participate in personal counseling, and an adventure program could enhance this process. Many students question their abilities and adventure programming could provide an outlet to process these legitimate concerns and to create metaphors for what a career in counseling may be like. It would be a great initiation for first year graduate students to convey the importance of having a support group throughout school and certainly throughout one’s career.

