An Innovative Teaching Method: Including Students as Advisors in Professional Work

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Abstract

This article describes the evaluation of a novel way to stimulate psychology-student learning and interest. The method involves inviting students to help plan the professional work of the course instructor, e.g., providing psychotherapy or doing research. The article focuses on the instructor's inviting students to help plan therapy for a client, a teaching method I have used for four years in my Behavior Modification course. I evaluated the effects of the method on self-reported student learning and interest. This past year several students posted suggestions on the course online learning platform. I applied the methods they suggested, while using my own judgment in sessions, and the client achieved her therapy goal. Students who completed an evaluation of the activity found it educational and interesting. Student evaluations of the course were high. The results suggest that the method has positive effects on learning and student interest. Psychology teachers can use the student-as-advisor teaching method to help psychology students learn and to help increase student interest in the content of a course.

Keywords: involving students as advisors, professional work, psychology, teaching methods

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Psychology instructors want their students to learn and to develop a strong interest in learning more in the future (see Hackathorn et al., 2012). Instructor behaviors can affect how much students learn and how satisfied they are (Geier, 2020). Psychology instructors try various ways to stimulate student interest, such as using team-based learning (Beek, 2021), assigning "unessays" (Goodman, 2022), and asking students to present a video presentation of covered content (Malouff & Shearer, 2016).

This article describes a novel way to stimulate and enrich student learning in a psychology course. The method involves inviting students to help plan professional work of the instructor.

The professional work could be designing a research study or providing psychotherapy or almost any other type of interesting professional work the instructor is doing. In this article I will describe how I use this method in teaching an undergraduate course on behavior modification. Specifically, I invite my students to suggest assessment and intervention methods for a new psychotherapy client of mine.

I started using the student-as-advisor teaching method four years ago. Before the start of the term I identify a potential client, sometimes a past student of mine. I choose as the potential client someone who had been helpful in one way or another in the past. I ask the person whether he or she wants to change some significant behavior as a client who is part of a teaching method. I explain that the client stays anonymous, with a false name and altered age and other characteristics provided to my students.

All the potential clients I approached over the years agreed to participate. Their goals for treatment varied: decreasing negative emotions, being less disagreeable at work, reducing

negative rumination, and ending a habit of comparing oneself to others who are superior in some way.

Here are several rules I follow in using the method: (1) I identify an acceptable problem or goal for the client before the start of the term. I have had success in this regard for four consecutive years. (2) I never take a client who has a life-threatening problem, such as being suicidal or having anorexia nervosa. I have successfully avoided this type of problem. (3) I tell my students that I will use my professional judgment about whether to follow specific suggestions. I followed all the student suggestions this year, but in prior years students occasionally suggested asking the client to complete a specific self-report scale, and I declined. (4) For ethical and other reasons, if the client wants to end prematurely, I will agree to that. However, no client has ever asked to end early. (5) I never report anything to my students that might identify the client. (6) I do the treatment online, so no one ever sees the client enter my office.

I have never based a graded assessment on the content of the sessions. The education provided is supplemental to the core content of the course. However, the exchanges with students about assessment and intervention methods do relate to some aspects of the core content of the course.

I will focus here on the most recent year, in which I treated the client for negatively comparing herself to others. I told the students, all of whom were external due to Covid pressures, that I would be treating "Emma" and stated the comparing problem she had mentioned in an email. I gave irrelevant incorrect background characteristics about her to help keep her anonymous.

I asked students what they would do as the therapist in the first session. Some said that they would focus on establishing rapport, e.g. by listening without judging. Others said that they would ask specific open-ended questions relating to the scope of the problem and when it started. One student suggested a self-monitoring assignment for Emma. In essence, the students suggested the types of professional behaviors we had covered in class.

Because all the suggestions were sensible, I followed them. The first session went according to plan. I found out that Emma compared herself to other women with regard to fitness and attractiveness and that the comparing led her to experience negative emotions. I asked Emma to self-monitor her comparing.

I later reported back to my students and asked them what to do in session 2. They suggested that I ask Emma about some of her life accomplishments and encourage her to review such moments when she started comparing herself negatively to another person.

In session 2 Emma said that she had stopped comparing herself to others by catching herself starting to do it and then telling herself to stop. I asked her whether she had other psychological problems and she told me that she felt stressed over her school work. We then talked about coping and self-calming methods. She had used some coping methods at times before. These methods included walking in nature, exercising, deep breathing, and talking with someone about what was stressing her. I suggested using the same methods with regard to school-related stress. Two of the methods were ones I covered in class with my students: deep breathing and talking with someone about a problem Also, I asked her to tell me about some of her life accomplishments.

I reported to my students what happened. They continued to offer suggestions for sessions.

The treatment did not always go smoothly. I showed up so late to one session that I missed talking with Emma that week. She postponed some sessions due to work or school pressures. Students did not always make suggestions for a coming session, so I started providing them and Emma with a session agenda prior to each session. I finished my work with Emma near the end of the term after six sessions when she indicated that she was not comparing herself to others and that she was coping with the pressures of school.

In total, seven students made suggestions about methods to use with Emma. Most of these students made multiple suggestions at different times.

Evaluation Methods and Results

Statistics produced by the online learning system indicated that 68 students accessed the discussion forum for the therapy case. That number was fourth highest of the 12 specific discussion forums in the course. The other specific forums pertained mostly to specific course requirements and assessments.

Just before the end of the term I invited the 111 students enrolled in the course to complete an anonymous evaluation of the client-treatment method of teaching. I asked these two questions: (1) "Did the teaching method, which involved the instructor treating Emma in collaboration with students, **help you learn** about how to use behavior modification methods to help a client?" (2) "Did the teaching method, which involved the instructor treating Emma in collaboration with students, **help stimulate your interest** in how to use behavior modification methods to help clients?" Answer options included yes and no. Fifteen students (14%) responded to my questions about the teaching method, and all of them answered yes to both questions.

After the term ended, my university asked my students to complete the standard anonymous evaluation of the course. Twenty-five (23%) students completed the evaluation. The

evaluation included several specific statements, including most importantly: "Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this unit [course]." Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The average overall evaluation of the unit was 4.42.

I asked Emma about her experience as the client. She reported that she was happy with achieving her goal. I pointed out that she also learned some things about providing therapy, which is what she plans to do as a career. All the teaching-method clients have kept in touch with me after finishing their role.

I also reflected on my experience in using the method. I found using the method exciting, in part because of the novelty of it and in part because of the usual excitement involved in trying to help a client.

Discussion

The novel teaching method worked well in the sense of helping students learn and stimulating their interest in learning more. The method may have played a role in the overall student evaluation of the course. The method may have been a good learning experience for the client. The fact that I found using the teaching method exciting is noteworthy because excited instructors tend to show their enthusiasm to students and thereby set a potent model for students (Frenzel et al., 2019).

It could be that only some students benefitted from the method and that the method served mostly as an enrichment activity for the keenest students. I consider those outcomes acceptable.

The limitations of the evaluation were that it mostly involved self-report and that the anonymous evaluations had a low student response rate. On the positive side, the different types of evaluative information all pointed toward the teaching method having a positive effect.

More students might engage actively in the treatment planning if they had an incentive involving receiving course points for participating. However, that sort of scheme would require me to keep track of each student and to record points. In a class of over 100 students, keeping track would be tedious. Another possible way to increase engagement would be to inform students that the course final exam may include a question relating to important principles mentioned in the therapy posts.

You might wonder what to do if the client does not improve or drops out. I have never had either happen with a teaching-related client, but those are both realistic outcomes for any therapy case. Such outcomes could be educational for students. If they happen to me, I will use the outcome as a basis for a reality lesson for students. Although every intervention example in my textbook (Miltenberger, 2014) leads to success, in practice some clients drop out of treatment, and some interventions fail.

To use this teaching method in a therapy course, an instructor must have appropriate therapy training, be open to treatment ideas suggested by students, be willing to devote a few hours a week to using the method, and have potential clients. Handling student interactions about the client on an online learning platform helps keep the interactions organized and available for student access.

Including students as advisors regarding designing research or other types of professional work might involve complexities that I have not covered here. For instance, students might best not be involved in designing a study if they could become participants. Nevertheless, I plan to try the method regarding research in a different course I teach.

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