

Final Report

Teaching narrative counselling as a transformative practice: a pilot study investigating whether student learning is akin to client experiences.

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Executive Summary

The aims and objectives of this pilot project are to 1) develop best practices in the teaching of narrative work; 2) provide a unique and powerful lens for understanding the effectiveness of narrative therapy; and 3) identify intersections between teaching and professional practice in this field. Students in the 2009 PGDip Counselling course at Unitec were interviewed about their positive learning experiences to determine whether these experiences are akin to extant client accounts of successful therapeutic work. Similarities between these two sets of experiences would allow research on teaching practice in this field to inform understandings of effective narrative work. The researchers found that there are indeed significant similarities between these two sets of experiences. Specifically both the teaching and the practicing of successful narrative ideas entail 1) decentring “expert” knowledge; 2) centering the agency of learners (students and clients); and 3) the creation of reflective, interactive, and dialogical space. Positioning theory has emerged as a useful set of ideas for capturing these conclusions, which speak to aim/objectives #2 and #3. Aim/objective 1 will follow from publication and further research.

Background

Narrative therapy is internationally acknowledged as cutting edge, but lacks an evidence base for its effectiveness and is generally under researched. The results of this study provide much-needed (pilot) data on best practices for teaching narrative therapy, and also provide insight into what might constitute an evidence base for effective narrative work.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this pilot project are to 1) develop best practices in the teaching of narrative work; 2) provide a unique and powerful lens for understanding the effectiveness of narrative therapy; and 3) identify intersections between teaching and professional practice in this field. The aims and objectives have not changed.

Methodology

Qualitative interviews are appropriate for a study that engages participants’ meaning-making around their learning. Interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of this topic at an individual level.

Outcomes/findings

Findings indicate that, like the effective practice of narrative therapy with clients, the successful teaching of these ideas entail 1) decentring “expert” knowledge; 2) centering the agency of learners (students and clients); and 3) the creation of reflective, interactive, and dialogical space.

Conclusions

This study indicates that there is congruence between the practice and the teaching of helpful narrative ideas. Positioning theory has emerged as a useful set of ideas for capturing these research findings. The findings can inform best practices in the teaching of narrative work, and they also suggest that existing literature on student-centred learning may shed light on what could constitute an evidence base for effective narrative practice.

Implications

Project results will be of interest to those who teach narrative ideas and counseling practices. Results will also be of interest to those who wish to explore the particulars of narrative therapy's effectiveness. With further research and a larger sample, this project also has the potential to contribute a narrative perspective to literature on student-centred learning. The results also have the potential to offer the kind of "practiced-based evidence" that is increasingly acknowledged as appropriate for qualitative and dialogical work (such as narrative therapy) in the "helping professions." The latter could improve the funding for and client access to narrative therapy.

More directly, students enrolled in the introductory course for the new postgraduate diploma in counseling at Unitec will benefit from the results of this project, which enables the embedding of reflective practice on teaching and learning within the course. Enhanced advice/mentoring is anticipated as well within the Counselling staff team.

Publications and dissemination

Will submit article to the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. One in-house presentation is also planned but is yet to be scheduled. The 2011 Unitec Research Symposium is one option.

These output goals differ from the original application because the project had to be scaled down (see interim report of March 10, 2010).