

How to educate future therapists more effectively

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In the classroom, what's the line between education and personal experience?

This is a question addressed by Concordia alumnus Jason Butler (PhD 14) in an article recently published by *The Arts in Psychotherapy*.

In the course of a North American and UK study, he found that the conflicting demands of education and therapy within the classroom can cause [emotional stress](#) and confusion among students in drama therapy and other professions using dramatic enactment.

His conclusion? The use of personal material must be better defined to protect both students and faculty.

"When educating therapists, particularly using experiential methods, things can become blurry," Butler notes.

"Instructors often take for granted that doing role-plays or other enactments within the classroom are relatively benign acts. However, this research shows that material can resonate with students in complex ways that often inhibit their learning and development."

Butler's study offers eight recommendations for improving the practice of drama therapy education.

These include increased transparency between teachers and students;

clearer policies on the use of affective material in the classroom; guidelines for evaluating and assessing emotional performance; and discussions within the professions about ethical and pedagogical practices.

"These findings point us in the direction of creating better systems and pedagogical approaches to enhance the [student](#) experience and educate more effective therapists."

The impact of self-regulation

In the study, students reported that they were asked to incorporate personal material into their assignments with the caveat that they avoid anything overwhelming.

The expectation of self-regulation without clear guidelines for evaluating what was appropriate created stress and uncertainty.

Some students also found the transition from mock therapy to teaching jarring, as it left emotional impacts insufficiently addressed or resolved. Others experienced uncertainty over how or if their emotional engagement would be graded.

For example, in a teaching demonstration an instructor might ask a student to assume the role of a trauma survivor without knowing they have direct experience as such. The student may feel obliged to engage with potentially harmful material in an inappropriate setting due to classroom pressure and the potential for evaluation.

Butler is quick to point out that affect is not the problem, however.

"Affective engagement can be a powerful tool for facilitating learning," he notes.

"Research has shown that therapists who are more aware of their own emotional experience are better equipped to work with the emotional experiences of their clients. The challenge here is to channel that affect in a responsible and transparent manner."

Better systems and pedagogical approaches

Butler conducted interviews and focus groups with students and faculty members at three drama therapy training programs in North America and the United Kingdom.

The data was sorted into themes and coded inductively to form a larger picture or research model of the student experience of affective engagement in the classroom.

That model showed that students wrestle with expectations regarding the appropriate level of engagement. This often leads to strong emotional responses in the [classroom](#), which in turn lead to negative consequences. Some students leave or fail out of the program; it is recommended that all seek [therapy](#).

For Butler, the findings suggest that more transparent communication is required between teachers and students.

"Without an understanding of the processes at play, we are not able to capitalize on the strengths that come from these approaches to learning."

More information: Jason D. Butler. The complex intersection of education and therapy in the drama therapy classroom, *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.aip.2017.01.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.01.010)

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