Student Perception of Creative Classwork in Counselling and Psychology Courses: A Case Study of Hong Kong Undergraduate Students

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This qualitative study examined how Hong Kong college students experience creative activities in counselling and psychology courses. Thematic analysis based on in-depth interviews with six participants showed that role-play, drama demonstration and fictional story writing were useful in facilitating their professional development and personal growth. The participants nonetheless provided specific suggestions and expressed concerns that take into account of the local Chinese culture. Overall, the findings highlight that students' perception of creative classwork is shaped by the local cultural context.

Personal creativity, broadly defined as the ability to generate ideas, identify patterns, create solutions, explore possibilities and develop insights, is an essential component in the work of counsellors and mental health professionals (Rouse et al., 2015). From a pedagogical standpoint, class activities and assignments that include a creative component have been recognized as an effective strategy to actualize the learning outcomes in counselling and related psychology courses. For instance, Sheldon (1996) reported that psychology students are generally interested in creating and performing skits as a form of theory or concept demonstration. Ho and Ho (2002) outlined the benefits of using dramatic monologue in teaching abnormal and developmental psychology courses. Creating and analyzing fictional characters with biographical content (Carlson, 1992) as well as role-playing as people with psychological disorders (Poorman, 2002) or as client-therapist dyad (Corsini, 2017) were also typical examples of creative classwork. Furthermore, creative tasks using role-plays and fictional stories are common for learning about concepts where perspective-taking is considered to be important, including cultural, racial, gender,

sexual orientation, social class, professional and ethical issues (e.g., Bleske-Rechek, 2001; Madson & Shoda, 2002; Kernahan & Davis, 2007; Fariña, 2009).

What is the role of such creative activities in fostering students' personal and professional development? What are the unique factors and concerns to be considered when they are implemented in a different cultural context? The present qualitative investigation seeks to provide insight to these questions based on in-depth interviews with six college students and alumni in Hong Kong.

Teaching psychological theories and counselling approaches in Hong Kong presents a unique case for exploring the potential cultural issues related to teaching these subjects internationally. Unlike mainland China and Taiwan, the teaching of psychology and counselling in Hong Kong higher education is mostly conducted with English as the primary medium of instruction. However, local students are inclined to think about and process the relevant theories and concepts with their native Chinese language. Accordingly, they are often preoccupied with the cognitive demand to connect psychological concepts with relevant local phenomena. Due to the shortage of mental health and counselling providers to meet the society's rising needs for such service (Yu & Okpych, 2013), as well as the variable training standards established by different professional bodies (Seay, 2010; Yuen et al., 2014), a portion of Hong Kong graduates with psychology or counselling degrees are readily employable in the frontline as programme workers, welfare workers, behavioral therapists, psychology assistants, and junior counsellors in public and private sectors. Therefore, it is important to examine local undergraduate students' experience of personal and professional growth.

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Method and Procedure

An invitation letter to participate in this study was emailed to the listserv of students and alumni majoring in psychology or counselling from five different colleges in Hong Kong. Fifteen individuals replied to indicate interest to participate. At the end, six participants from three different colleges were able to attend face-to-face interviews within the proposed timeframe. As shown in Table 1.1., two participants were male and four were female, three of them were college seniors and the other three were either working or further studying in a relevant field. A total of six semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, using a set of interview questions as template (*See Appendix I). The transcribed data were organized and analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis in psychology: 1) data familiarization 2) initial coding 3) generating themes 4) reviewing themes 5) naming themes 6) writing up. Participants were assigned with pseudonyms to safeguard confidentiality from data analysis to report writing. Their basic background information was outlined in the table below.

Table 1

	Pseudo-nyms	Gen-der	Age	Major of Study	Study / Job Status
1	A(dam)	M	22	Psychology	College Senior
2	B(rie)	F	24	Counselling	Social Work M.A.
3	C(arrie)	F	24	Psychology	Playgroup Counsellor
4	D(iana)	F	22	Psychology	College Senior
5	E(dmond)	M	23	Counselling	Social Welfare
6	F(lora)	F	22	Counselling	College Senior

Core Themes and Sub-themes

Theme 1: Role-play is an effective classwork insofar as it is not based on real-life content

Role-play is a widely adopted classroom activity in psychology and counselling courses. In addition to its entertaining aspect, role-play activities related to mental health and treatment have been considered to be an effective way to enhance students' basic counselling capacities such as empathy and active listening (Anderson et al., 1989; Poorman, 2002) as well as assessment and conceptualization skills (Balleweg, 1990).

In this study, the participants unvaryingly preferred role-playing hypothetical scenarios to simulated real-life situations (e.g., acting the role of a student's parent). The former was perceived as a safe and more comfortable role-play format in terms of its potential emotional impact, confidentiality and privacy issues. The participants emphasized that it would be anxiety-provoking to bring real-life experience into the activity. They shared similar concerns about the possibility of private information getting spread around. Carrie shared her experience of a role-play exercise in an Abnormal Psychology course

where the class tutor acted as a counsellor and her groupmates as a made-up family in which a member was suffering from a psychological disorder:

It was great that the lecturer instructed us to make up a family story. We knew there were classmates who had similar experience in life, but it would have been unsafe to bring it to the centre stage of the class. Many classmates were watching and we were not yet professionals. People gossip and talk about this kind of things. There is strong stigma about mental illnesses in our society. Students might feel comfortable to share with their close friends or even with professors privately, but not in front of a class because it might bring shame or scrutiny that you won't know.

Given the prevalence of emotional disturbances related to academic performance among Hong Kong college students (Lun et al., 2018), it was interesting that the participants did not express any concerns about being graded in role-playing exercises. They believed that students are generally rewarded for good effort in a way that is similar to in-class participation. However, they shared the concern about disclosing family contents that are highly stigmatized in the local culture. To avoid potential shame and embarrassment, they believed that it would be a better learning experience if role-playing activities or assignments are based on hypothetical scenarios. This finding was consistent with the literature on the widespread shame-based (Chang & Holt, 1994) and relationship-based "face" concerns (Wong & Tsai, 2007) in Chinese cultures.

On the other hand, the participants perceived role-playing activities as a form of practical rehearsal that is useful for enhancing basic counselling skills. Adam and Flora shared their experience of participating in a similar activity in an introductory level counselling course. They found that the activity was not only fun and entertaining, but also provided a much-needed platform to practice counselling microskills. It was perceived as a form of transition from knowledge and theory comprehension to actual practicum or internship practice.

Brie also shared her experience in a role-play exercise in a course titled Child Counselling. The assignment required each pair of students to role-play the interaction between a parent and a teenaged child that characterizes a specific parenting style, as well as to discuss how such relationship might contribute to the child's later cognitive, behavioral and emotional problems. She reported that her dyad was very interested in designing the interaction and watching the demonstrations from other groups. Furthermore, she was somewhat surprised by the insight they learned from this activity:

Just having a fun activity to do would be good because we have a lot of papers to write. We enjoy something entertaining once in a while, but I remember this activity because I learned a lot. We know that most students drew on their experience when planning for this role-play, but the good thing is that no one needed to declare whether their ideas were based on their actual experience or imagination. It could be confidential if we wanted it to be. Some groupmates who were close friends would voluntarily share their real experience with each other, so in a way it allowed some of us to know each other deeper. As far as I know, most students did not automatically look into themselves when these attachment or parenting styles were taught. This assignment encouraged us to do that in a safe way. It was the first time I had an answer in my mind about what parenting style I experienced as a child.

The participants also agreed that role-playing exercises are especially valuable for those who opt for practicum training in senior year. They agreed that it is appropriate to increase the intensity, complexity and rigor of such activities as students

proceed into the latter half of curriculum (i.e., sophomore and senior years). To elaborate, Flora aptly put it in the following way: *I think when we were freshman or junior having fun collaborating with other classmates was acceptable. Maybe role-playing at this stage should count less of the overall grade. But it would still be good learning. It can help us build comfort about future roles, like a counsellor or social worker. It can also help us understand the perspective of individuals that we don't understand, like the people with certain disorders or disability. Later on, I think it is more important to see if we are practicing the skills correctly. I think it can be a bigger project that takes many weeks of preparation, such as role-playing a clinical interview session.*

Theme 2: Drama demonstration facilitates creativity and reflectiveness, but the level of acting required is a potential concern

Compared to role-play which allows more room for improvisation, creating and performing a drama or skit requires more coordinated teamwork and well-rehearsed live delivery. Use of skits to enhance students' learning experience in psychology classes has been a well-documented method (Sheldon, 1996). Overall, the participants in this study agreed on three major sub-themes. First, drama performance is intended to be a fun assignment but not everyone enjoys being on the spotlight. Second, Chinese students are more anxious about the relatively vague guidelines for achieving an ideal grade in a drama assessment. Third, the nature of this type of activity allows students to be creative and culturally reflective.

Diana described her experience in completing a group project in a psychotherapy theories course. Students in this course were asked to conduct a myth analysis based on Freudian theories or Jungian archetypes. They were given a choice to perform their chosen myths in the form of a brief drama. Interestingly, all the groups in her class opted for the drama format and put a lot of creativity into the preparation and performance. Diana remarked:
That was a memorable class because our group had a lot of fun putting our performance together and we were very entertained watching other groups performing their skits. Some event made their own props and costumes. Our professor allowed us to act out the myth we selected which was more amusing than verbally presenting the myths. We did not know the details of these ancient myths whether they were Eastern or Western. This activity led us to research more about them. We decided to act out the Pangu creation myth. Although the skit was kind of more like an entertainment piece, unlike a serious artistic performance, we enjoyed creating something together. Many students knew very little about these myths, so I think we all learned something new. We understood more about these ancient myths and how they impacted ancient people for generations in our cultures.

Brie and Edmond shared an experience of performing a short drama for a course about adolescent development. They were instructed to conduct a movie analysis on the developmental issues in teenagers and select a short scene from the movie for skit performance. Students were given a choice to perform the scene in its original, modified, culturally adapted or generation-specific version. Those who selected Western movies were encouraged to create a culturally comparable version. Brie was in an all-girl group performing a scene in a popular Hollywood teen movie, *Mean Girls*, which highlights the importance of look, style and interpersonal and dating rules for female friendships in high school in early 2000s. Brie explained in the following:
We performed the scene in its original form because we felt that it was really interesting and not many of our classmates saw this movie before. But it really helped us to think about how some of the same female politics are the same here, but some are very different especially in our generation. For example, sexy dressing was not a good way to become popular and get positive attention in high school here, even if you have a very beautiful body.

Edmond was in an all-boy group performing a scene from a local movie which is based on a true story over twenty years ago where a high school boy was bullied and beaten to death by his peers. His group modified the scene to include more examples of verbal and physical bullying that they had witnessed or experienced in high school. Edmond explained in the following:
We gained a lot of awareness from this activity. It was an intense experience because we were acting out a true story. Someone actually experienced this! We modified the scene to include other forms of abuse and bullying that were damaging toa teenager's development. Not everyone who got bullied would end up with physical damage but the consequences were always bad. We hoped to include examples of other damaging effects, like suicide attempts or joining street gangsters. These happened a lot here.

In terms of potential concerns, the participants agreed that shy or introverted students are doubtlessly anxious about being in the spotlight as amateur actors or actresses. They recommended that instructors should allow some students to take up backstage responsibilities as an alternative. Regarding the benefits for personal and professional growth, they had a slight difference in opinion about drama creation and performance. Adam, Carrie and Flora never experienced this type of activity in college, but they believed that it is primarily an entertaining group work for demonstrating psychological theories and concepts. Given that it is not the same as drama therapy, they felt that its impact on their personal and professional growth was indirect and limited. In contrast, Brie, Diana and Edmond reported gaining personal insight and professional perspectives from their respective drama assignments. However, they reported that a few groups were quite disappointed with their grades. According to Edmond, he approached a female friend from another presentation group after the grades were released online:
It is very typical for us to share our grades with each other. We do this in every course, basically. But my friend was not happy and her group was quite shocked about their grade. She said it was not a very bad grade, but they were confused about what they did wrong to earn a lesser grade than other groups. I asked her because I knew her group really enjoyed this assignment as well. She did not tell me the exact grade and it was almost as if she was too embarrassed to talk about it after I disclosed my grade. For a fun assignment, we often thought grading would be easy such that every group would be a winner.

Alternatively, Edmond suggested that instructors might consider making it a no-grade assignment or an effort-based assessment. Several participants also expressed concerns about the grading criteria for assignments involving a skit component. They noted that some students were used to having a sense of control over their grade through diligent studying endeavour. Accordingly, a drama performance as a gradable component was definitely out of their comfort zone. They believed that the positive learning experience could have been forgotten by those who received an unsatisfactory grade, highlighting that Hong Kong culture inevitably emphasizes reputable results or outcomes in the form of grades, awards and other tangible recognitions.

Theme 3: Analysis of fictional stories is better than self-analysis

Traditional self-analysis (Sawatzky et al., 1994; Manthei, 1997) in a written assignment is useful for enhancing self-understanding and application of theories. In some cultures, nonetheless, it can be anxiety provoking for students to provide a real-life depiction of themselves in which the content involved might be in conflict with their cultural or religious values such as filial piety and familial pride. Alternatively, analysis of fictional characters can be a viable alternative. Adam shared his experience of creating a fictional story to capture how various unconscious defensive mechanisms work in the life of a fictional character:

Ultimately, it was more meaningful for learning about defenses if we used them to understand our lives. I meant it for lifelong learning. But for an assignment, we only had weeks to get in touch with our memories and examine our past experience. If we must do this on the basis of real experience, it would have been a challenge to make the content fit the theories. I liked the fictional aspect because it could have been entirely based on my actual experience, a mixture of real, imagined and observed events, or entirely based on fantasy and imagination. I think students were at different stages mentally; some probably gained more by reflecting on what they observed in others, and some were more open to explore themselves indirectly through fictional biographies rather than their own stories.

All participants preferred this type of reflective analysis to be based on fictional characters rather than autobiographical content. Self-analysis was perceived as a very personal revelation which should be done with close supervisory support. In fact, research showed that there are cultural differences in psychological mindedness which underlies our readiness to examine and reflect on ourselves (Kirmayer, 2007). A few participants also stated that self-reflective skills are not emphasized in primarily and secondary school education in Hong Kong. As a result, some students would rather do more academic writing assignments and quizzes instead of reflective analysis projects.

In terms of potential benefits, the participants generally converged on two major sub-themes. Firstly, creating a fictional character is an intriguing and less anxiety-provoking way to reflect on themselves, but the degree to which one can gain useful insight from the activity is unpredictable. Secondly, analyzing fictional stories is a good initial practice for case conceptualization because it is easier to apply theories to understand a fictional character. Brie described her view as follow:

I think most students in my cohort believe that a fictional character created by ourselves is like a reflection of the self. It is like projection. We project bits of ourselves to the character. I am quite sure some of us are not used to looking into ourselves in a direct and persistent way. The appeal of analzying a character is a good start. In my group project, we created a dysfunctional family with five characters and analyzed how the family dynamics affected the mental health of different members. We presented the storylines in class as part of the assignment. Maybe a couple of us were adamant that the characters they created had nothing to do with their own experience, but they still felt that there was a kind of resonance with the characters. For me, I knew I was projecting some attachment issues on my fictional character, but the unexpected insight I got from this was the realization that my character was expressing more hurtfulness and anger than I did. The insight was valuable.

With regard to the reason for perceiving analysis of fictional biography as less anxiety provoking than self-analysis,

Edmond provided the following remark that accentuates the underlying cultural and familial considerations:

If you analyze yourself and it has to be written, then you are putting yourself out there. First of all, you can be wrong with the theories used. Then, if you are truthful, perhaps you did something bad before or there was some dirt in your family history, I can't say most students have this kind of trust with their teachers. If you do self-analysis, you have to own up to everything that you write in the paper. What if it was something shameful? What if it was something stigmatized, like your parents were mentally ill? What if some fantasies were very strange and you knew how others here would generally think about them? What if your parents accidentally see the paper, like about what you think they fell short as parents? That would create a huge conflict and threaten the family's bond.

The participants perceived that self-analysis inevitably includes disclosure of private information such as past wrongdoings, aberrant family backgrounds or unmet needs in their development. They believed that their parents would have been upset or hurt if they are aware of such content and narrative, which would make them feel guilty about causing emotional disturbance in the family. Although they agreed that self-analysis practice is crucial for developing self-understanding and psychological insight, it was suggested that such activity is better conducted in the form of small clinical seminar, process group or individual supervision. A few participants were concerned about the extent to which grading might be affected by poor imagination and creative writing skills. In fact, research showed that our ability to create a complex and rich fictional story is related to personality variables (Maslej et al., 2017). The participants suggested that it would be better to minimize the weight of fictional writing skills in the grading rubrics and emphasize adequate and creative application of theories and concepts.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was based on six college students and alumni in psychology or counselling who were motivated, committed and reflective lifelong learners. The participants were generally appreciative of their learning experience from creative class activities, which were conducive to their professional and personal growth in different ways. They also made suggestions and shared concerns that reflect values and characteristics of the local culture, as evidenced by their preference for role-playing hypothetical situations, analyzing fictional characters and performing drama as a no-grade activity. Research showed that culture inevitably shapes our experience of self-expression (Tafarodi et al., 2004; Kokkoris & Kuhnen, 2014). Despite having an overall positive perception or experience of these activities, the participants were somewhat concerned about doing anything that might lead to personal shame, contradict filial piety or threaten their grades. Receiving an undesirable grade to some extent was perceived as an invalidation of a meaningful learning experience.

This study has implications for teaching psychology and counselling courses in Chinese, Asian and other non-Western cultures. Overall, the findings suggest that specific creative activities such as role-play, drama demonstration, and analysis of fictional biography, can potentially provide a stimulating learning experience for Chinese students. From a broader perspective, this observation serves as a reminder that students' perception of creative classwork is inevitably shaped by their cultural backgrounds. Course instructors teaching in non-Western

countries are advised to openly discuss with students about their thoughts and concerns, some of which are likely to be culturally-rooted, prior to the implementation of such activities.

Appendix I: Interview Guiding Questions

What are your views and experiences in (i.e., role play/drama/fictional biography) during your major study?

What were the course(s) in which you participated in these activities?

What was the impact of these activities, if any, on you course-specific learning process (e.g., learning outcomes)?

What were the pros and cons about the ways in which these activities were constructed and conducted?

What was the impact of these activities, if any, on your development or growth as a professional in relevant fields?

What modifications to these activities would you recommend lecturers/professors to consider making?

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