

Fostering Inclusivity and Belonging:

A Reflective Journey in Teaching 'The Psychology of Drug Addiction and Behavior'

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The first day of class arrived, and I was brimming with excitement to teach my newly designed special topics course, 'The Psychology of Drug Addiction and Behavior.' As a former addiction therapist with a decade of experience—well beyond the typical burnout rate of two to three years in the field—this course was more than a professional endeavor; it was my way to give back to the community. I felt a profound responsibility to help students interested in counseling understand that working with addiction presents unique challenges. These were not the typical patients who eagerly sought help or welcomed therapeutic intervention. Instead, they often resisted assistance, and some would even exploit a therapist's vulnerabilities to deflect from their own weaknesses.

Teaching this course presented a unique challenge. I was stepping into a classroom to discuss a topic that, for many students, carried personal biases and emotional baggage. These biases stemmed from personal experiences with substance use, either individually or within their families, and were often compounded by media inaccuracies and dramatizations. The task was daunting, but it also presented the perfect opportunity to create an inclusive and belonging environment.

This wasn't a course where I could kick things off with a traditional ice breaker activity, as I might in a social psychology or behavioral statistics course. Instead, I had to don my old 'therapist' hat and create a space that encouraged open communication, used inclusive

language, and set the tone for mutual respect and shared expectations between faculty and students. I achieved this in three ways.

First, at our initial class meeting—before we even reviewed the syllabus—we collaboratively established norms for the class. These included:

- Assume someone in the room has the identity or experience we are discussing.
- Allow time for reflection and processing. Make space for silence.
- Listen respectfully to unfamiliar perspectives, and let people finish sentences before responding.
- Speak only for ourselves — we will not generalize other people’s experiences.
- Hold space for dialogue instead of debate.
- Expect and accept discomfort and non-closure.

This co-construction of norms through interactive dialogue empowered students to be active participants in the learning environment, rather than mere spectators. This approach involved facilitating a dialogue where students could openly express their ideas about what they needed to feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, especially concerning this topic. Interestingly, I observed that students held each other more accountable when a norm was broken, possibly because these norms were created by the class itself. This level of accountability was noticeably higher than in my other courses, where I typically provide the expectations.

Once we had established our norms, the next step was to encourage students to approach the subject matter with an open, unbiased mind. So, in our second class meeting, I did what any good instructor would do—I challenged their preconceptions. I began the class by asking, 'When you hear the words 'addict' and 'alcoholic,' what comes to mind?' As expected, I was met with a sea of anxious faces.

To break the ice, I wrote the word 'liar' on the board to begin the list. Then, I invited the students to openly share their beliefs, media perceptions, and any associated terms, character traits or thoughts about an 'addict' or 'alcoholic', regardless of any potential negative

connotations or stereotypes these terms may carry. They could do this by either writing directly on the board or jotting down their thoughts on a post-it note for me to include. Some chose the latter option, preferring the anonymity it offered.

With a list of negative traits now on the board, I posed another question: 'Can you find something positive in these traits?' For instance, we reframed 'stealing' as indicative of risk-taking and fortitude, and 'getting drugs without getting caught' as a demonstration of critical thinking.

You might wonder how this exercise was beneficial. By shifting the perspective from negative, toxic traits to positive traits that could aid a substance user in recovery, we were able to challenge and deconstruct personal biases and stereotypes about the substance user population. This exercise underscored the importance of seeing beyond labels to recognize humanity. It highlighted how stereotypical thinking can hinder a counselor's ability to help a recovering user transition from their addiction to a healthier life.

The third approach involved getting to know my students better to tailor the course to their needs and interests. At the end of our first class, I assigned a reflective writing task that asked the following questions:

- Who are you?
- Why are you interested in taking this class?
- What do you hope to learn?
- What is something you want to know? Be specific.
- What are your current beliefs, values, ideas around substance use?

This assignment gave students the opportunity to privately and honestly express their beliefs, values, and ideas about substance use. At the end of the semester, they completed the same reflection, allowing them to identify any changes in their beliefs because of the course.

To my surprise, the course had a profound impact. Students personally affected by substance use expressed less anger and a greater understanding of addiction as a disease.

Those who initially expressed prejudice demonstrated increased awareness and empathy. Even criminal justice majors, who took this course as an elective, began to see beyond black-and-white views of right and wrong, acknowledging the gray areas in certain circumstances. I was immensely proud of my students. More importantly, the experience underscored the value of starting every class with shared norms, an open discussion of biases related to the topic, and reflective exercises to foster student growth.

As I reflect on the success of this course, I am reminded of the power of inclusivity and belonging in the learning environment. The strategies I employed—establishing shared norms, challenging biases, and fostering self-reflection—were instrumental in creating a space where students felt seen, heard, and valued. These approaches not only facilitated a deeper understanding of the subject matter but also fostered personal growth among the students. As I move forward in my teaching career, I am committed to integrating these strategies into all my courses, regardless of the subject matter. I believe that fostering an inclusive and belonging environment is not just beneficial—it's essential to meaningful learning and growth. My hope is that other educators will also adopt these strategies, recognizing the profound impact they can have on students' learning experiences and their lives beyond the classroom.