An Initial Examination of Student Preferences Between Visual and Non-visual Modes of Case Processing

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Abstract

The present study examined counselling students' preferences between two modes of conceptualizing and presenting interview cases. Subjective ratings on visual and non-visual methods were obtained from 19 students who were exposed to both modes in an elementary counselling course. The visual mode using metaphors and drawings was rated more positively than the non-visual mode on two areas of case processing (i.e., conceptualization and presentation). The differences were statistically significant. Students considered the visual mode more effective in developing an understanding of the client and the helping process. It was also considered more effective in facilitating presenters' self-expression and exploration of feelings, in focusing the discussion, in summarizing the case, and in maintaining objectivity in case presentation. An example of visual case processing is provided, and the study's limitations and practical implications are discussed.

Résumé

La présente étude examine les préférences des étudiants en counseling entre deux modes de conceptualisation et de présentation d'interviews avec des clients. Les évaluations subjectives des méthodes visuelle et non-visuelle ont été obtenues à partir de 19 étudiants qui furent exposés aux deux modes dans un cours de counseling de base. Le mode visuel qui utilise des métaphores et des dessins a été évalué plus positivement que le mode non-visuel sur deux plans du traitement de cas (i.e., conceptualisation et présentation). Les différences étaient statistiquement significatives. Les étudiants ont considéré le mode visuel plus efficace à développer une habileté à mieux comprendre le client et à saisir le processus d'aide. Il a été considéré plus efficace aussi, en ce qu'il facilitait l'expression et l'exploration des sentiments des présentateurs, aidait à centrer la discussion, à résumer le cas, et à maintenir une objectivité lors de la présentation de cas. Un exemple d'un processus de cas avec le mode visuel est présenté, et les limitations et implications de cette étude sont discutées.

Helping students to explore various aspects of helping processes and to conceptualize cases effectively is a major task of counsellor educators (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Loganbill & Stoltenberg, 1983). Case conceptualization has an element of problem solving. Rule (1984) has pointed out how complex problems can be explored using rich images and intuitively generated metaphors. Metaphors, images, and expressive arts have been used in helping communication and in personal problem solving (Dielman, Stevens, & Lopez, 1984; Dilley, 1971; Gladding, 1984; McKim, 1972; Samples, 1980). Hobbs (1983) has suggested that metaphors can generate new insights and grounds for exploration that are otherwise inaccessible through logical, cognitive processing.

Amundson (1988) and Ishiyama (1988) recently proposed a visual method of case processing. This involves conceptualizing, presenting, and exploring cases using images, metaphors, symbols, drawings, and other creative and intuitive means. The authors suggested both a

practical and educational value in adding a visual component to the traditionally verbal supervision sessions. Amundson (1987) reported positive responses to "case drawing" from his trainees. So far, however, no study has examined how a visual mode of exploration is perceived by students in contrast to a non-visual mode. The present study, therefore, is an initial attempt to examine student preferences between two contrasting ways of processing cases.

METHODOLOGY

Participants. Participants were 19 student volunteers enrolled in an elementary level counselling course. The course was taught by the author, at a westcoast Canadian university. Participants included 5 males and 14 females. There was an age range of 21-64 with a mean of 35.6. Most of the participants had previous teaching and/or guidance experience. None reported any experience or training in formal case presentation.

Instrument. A 15-item Case Processing Checklist was developed by the author, eight items of which were previously used by Amundson (1987). The perceptions of each mode of case processing were measured by two scales on conceptualization effectiveness and presentation effectiveness. The conceptualization effectiveness scale had six items: regarding four aspects of understanding (client, helper, client-helper relationship, and helping goals), additional insight, and direction for future sessions. The presentation effectiveness scale had seven items regarding: the richness of self-expression, focus in discussion, case summary, inviting others' input, increased objectivity in presentation, and exploration of helper feelings. The sum of ratings was used as the score for each scale. Three additional items were included in the Checklist for exploratory purposes on "learning how to present cases effectively," "overall satisfaction with my presentation," and "my verbal involvement in others' presentations." All the items were answered on a 9-point scale with "low" and "high" at each end. As to scale reliability, the conceptualization scale had alphas of .88 and .80, based on the present data on the visual and non-visual methods, respectively. Similarly, the presentation scale had alphas of .79 and .84. Thus, both scales showed high internal consistency.

Procedure. Students were randomly assigned to four small groups with a similar male-female ratio. In these groups, the students had two case processing sessions. Ten students in two groups were first exposed to the visual mode of case processing and then to the non-visual mode one week later. Nine students in the other two groups were exposed to the same in a reverse order. Students took turns discussing their latest interview case for the maximum of 30 minutes, following uniform instructions for each mode. Because the author was the course instructor, attempts were made to avoid influencing student preferences and ratings. With no

prior discussion on case processing modes, students were told that they would receive instructions for preparing a case presentation on two separate occasions, and that the purpose of case discussion was to share their interview experiences and develop further insights. The Checklist was completed the day after the second case processing session.

Non-visual mode. Students individually completed the following six sentence stems for 5-10 minutes prior to case presentation:

1. What I see as the client's main concern is:
2. The way the client interacted with me is:
3. What I was trying to do in this session is:
4. What I felt or thought about myself as counsellor during this session is:
5. The way this session went is:
6. What I think the client gained (or failed to gain) from this session is:

Visual mode: Students first read the above six sentence stems, in order to direct their attention to the same aspects of helping, and proceeded to the tasks of generating metaphors and drawing for 5-10 minutes by responding to the following instructions:

1. The way I perceive the client with his/her concern may be characterized by a metaphor or an image like:
2. The way the client responded to me and felt toward me during this session may be characterized by a metaphor or an image like:
3. The way I conducted myself during this session may be characterized by a metaphor or an image like:
4. The way this session went may be characterized by a metaphor or an image like:
5. Metaphor drawing instructions: Please draw freely the case you dealt with in this session on a separate sheet. It is not at all important how aesthetic your drawing is. What is most important is to accurately express how you experienced yourself, your client, and the session. Artistic qualities are not relevant here at all. Feel free to include abstract symbols, words, phrases, or sentences in case drawing. Make sure that you include the following features in your symbolic, metaphoric, or realistic drawing of the case: (1) yourself as counsellor and as person, (2) the client and his/her concern, (3) your relationship with the client (i.e., how you and the client related to each other), (4) how the session went, and (5) where the case is going. Colour crayons and blank sheets of 11 x 17 inches were made available to participants.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the visual mode of case processing was more positively rated than the non-visual mode in terms of facilitating improvements in case conceptualization and case presentation. The differences between the two modes of case processing were statistically

significant in scores on both scales using 2-tailed t tests. The visual mode was rated slightly more positively on the three additional exploratory items, but no statistically significant differences were found.

In addition, a 2 x 2 analysis of variance was used to study the effects of the case processing mode and the order of exposure on each Checklist item. The visual mode consistently received significantly higher ratings on all items in both scales. Relatively small, but statistically significant order effects were found on six Checklist items. Those who had been exposed to the visual mode first gave higher ratings for the visual mode on these six items than those exposed to it second. There were no statistically significant interactions between the main effect and the order effect.

Students' comments on the two modes generally corroborated the results of the study. However, there were also some comments in support of the non-visual mode and concerns were expressed about the visual mode. One student felt more at home and less inhibited when verbally discussing a case without metaphors or drawings. Another student questioned the validity of subjective interpretations and projections using metaphors and images, and wrote, "I have to admit that [the visual mode] was more subjective in its entire nature, in spite of my personal satisfaction and deepened understanding of the case from this method."

One student's drawing showed her client standing at the fork of a road with two extending paths (autonomous living and choice vs. walking in

TABLE 1

T-test (2-tailed) Comparisons of Facilitativeness of Visual and Non-visual Modes of Case Processing as Perceived by 19 Students

Variables	Visual Mode Mean and SD		Non-Visual Mode Mean and SD		t value	
Conceptualization Effectiveness	43.90	(5.48)	35.05	(4.96)	18 df	5.61 *
Presentation Effectiveness	43.79	(5.18)	35.53	(5.92)	18 df	5.18 *
Learning about Case Presentation	6.95	(1.13)	6.32	(1.49)	18 df	1.88 ns
Satisfaction with My Presentation	7.26	(1.49)	6.32	(1.46)	18 df	1.88 ns
Verbal Involvement in Others' Presentation	6.95	(1.35)	6.68	(1.29)	18 df	0.68 ns

* $p < .001$ ns: non-significant

her boyfriend's shadow). The counsellor was a travelling companion trying to understand empathically in order to help the client. They walked past the initial phase of exploration with an image of the sun shining above them: "good friends chatting over tea with much trust and empathy." In another part of the drawing, the counsellor saw some clouds ahead (i.e., difficulties exploring client feelings more deeply and effectively), and felt like "an archer with poor aim." The student described her experience of discussing the above case as follows: "It was like a counselling session for a counsellor. It provided an excellent opportunity to talk about my performance as counsellor. It helped to talk it out and get empathic responses."

DISCUSSION

The visual mode of case processing was perceived more positively than the non-visual mode in terms of facilitating improved case conceptualization and effective case presentation. These results suggest that adding a visual dimension to a more conventional verbal approach has both practical and educational value (Amundson, 1988; Ishiyama, 1988). It seems to have additive, holistically expressive, visually focusing, and conceptually enriching effects. On the other hand, students also appreciated other approaches and felt satisfied with, and involved in, both presentation modes. This could be a reflection of students' eagerness to learn and practise case presentation as a novel and rewarding activity.

Generalization from this study must remain tentative, due to the following limitations of the present study: (1) Participants were a small number of students who were not randomly selected from a larger pool. (2) There was an absence of objective and behavioural data to accompany preference ratings. (3) Relatively untrained students participated in both the counselling and the case presentation. (4) Opportunities were not amply provided for students to become accustomed to, and competent in, both modes of case processing. Finally (5) there was no control of personality attributes (e.g., imaging ability; Singer, 1974; Tower & Singer, 1980) and group composition and dynamics. Future studies, therefore, need to address these issues. Researchers may explore how each mode of case processing influences the process and content of discussion. They may also identify the types of individuals who would benefit from a visual mode of case processing.

From a more practical viewpoint, counsellor educators might explore ways of integrating a visual mode of case processing into their theoretical and technical models of counselling and supervision. Also, counsellor trainees may selectively share their case metaphors and drawings with their clients for therapeutic purposes. Future studies are needed to examine if and how the use of a visual mode of case processing would facilitate student progress in developing counselling competencies and deeper awareness of counselling processes.

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