Extend Activity #1

Misunderstood

A commonly misunderstood concept in the broad field of social work is that social workers (counsellors, therapists, etc.) can “fix” people’s problems. We as social workers aim to teach skills and tools so that people can fix their own problems, which is more empowering. Interestingly and ironically, empowering is a synonym of enabling – but NOT if you’re a social worker! It is important for my students to understand the concept of empowering and differentiate from enabling in order to be successful at building confidence and self-efficacy in clients rather than create dependence, and on a mezzo scale to help build capacity in communities.

To teach my college students in the mental health and addictions program the concept of empowerment, I might use two separate analogies that would help differentiate between enabling and empowering: an anchor and propeller.

To ***enable*** a client would be to help by way of “doing for them”, which can be as simple as making a phone call on their behalf to make a referral instead of having them do it themselves with perhaps a bit of practice and encouragement. It can also involve telling them “You should” or “you need to” instead of asking them, “what have you tried that hasn’t worked?” and “what options do you think you have that might produce different results?” When we enable people by telling them what to do or by doing things for them it stifles growth rather than promoting it.

A propeller is ***dynamic*** (it represents movement and change) whereas an anchor is ***static*** (still, so no movement or change). For us to change we need practice or *action* to move forward, progress, and grow. Not to act or to have a social worker act on a person’s behalf creates dependence, oppression, growth suppression, and stagnation (like an immobile anchor). Growth occurs when we learn new skills (self-efficacy, self-esteem, resilience), particularly when we learn through experiential learning by being interactive and engaged, like a propeller navigating new waters.

Experiential learning embraces the principles of andragogy, self-directed learning, and will ideally be transformative. It can involve any modality of universal design for learning (UDL) including text, audio, video, and hands-on learning. For example, instead of just explaining to a client how their thoughts create feelings which then create behaviours/actions (cognitive-behavioural technique or CBT), we can give them the visual of this in the form of a triangle (with thoughts, feelings, and actions at each corner) and a practice log sheet to document what negative or distorted thoughts they had, what negative emotions resulted, and what undesirable actions/behaviours their thoughts and emotions produced. They can also chart what they might do differently next time to produce a more desirable outcome. Again, we are not “fixing” a client’s problems by dropping a concept (anchor) into their lap to hold, rather we are including them in a collaborative process – they are not a mere observer rather they self-track, introspect, gain insight, and provide feedback to the social worker while feeling empowered by taking an active (propelling) roll in addressing their problems or challenges.

From moving away from basic verbal or visual *instruction* to experimental and/or UDL, the frontal lobe area responsible for *executive functioning* or higher learning is stimulated, such as decision making, planning/organizing, using judgement, gaining insight, and problem-solving. When we engage in these processes we are empowered!

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This mind map is one example of how the concept of empowerment can be demonstrated with the analogy of a propeller and differentiated from enabling with the analogy of an anchor.



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