

The Impact of Transformational Learning Experiences on Personal and Professional Counselor-in-Training Identity Development



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Michelle Kelley Shuler
Elizabeth A. Keller-Dupree

Transformational learning experiences for counselor training can be described as experiential activities that facilitate the ability to express feelings and meanings related to life issues. The authors investigated the impact of a 2-day seminar using transformational learning experiences on the personal and professional identity development of counselors-in-training. Quantitative results indicate that participants' self-reported professional performance scores were not significantly different following the training. However, in the qualitative inquiry, participants noted that through the transformational learning experiences, they became aware of past and present challenges, the need for change, the impact of processing within a group, and the application of transformational activities in clinical practices. Such findings indicate how transformational learning experiences—particularly through the use of reflective journaling—might influence personal identity development among counselors-in-training.

Keywords: personal identity development, professional identity development, transformational learning, counselor-in-training

The promotion of professionalism is a significant component of counselor training and is recognized by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) as a core curriculum requirement for graduate counseling programs (CACREP, 2009). Professionalism includes knowledge and understanding of professional organizations, legal and ethical standards, the role of counselors, professional competencies, and personal and professional growth. Development in this area includes both personal and professional growth and is often referred to as counselor development (Gazzola & Theriault, 2007; Rabinor, 2004; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1996; Thompson, 2004) or counselor professional identity (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009; Nugent & Jones, 2009; O'Bryne & Rosenberg, 1998; Reisetter et al., 2004).

Independently, professional development encompasses the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and is “concerned with the doing needs” (Donati & Watts, 2005, p. 476), and personal development includes the “being needs” (p. 476), like authenticity, interpersonal engagement, intimacy and self-evaluation. As dependent concepts, one can imagine the significance each has for counselor identity. A counselor lacking skills and knowledge will function quite differently than a skilled practitioner with years of experience and knowledge. Concurrently, counselors must attend to their own form of personal development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1996). Wilkins (1997) went so far as to suggest that personal development embraces everything else that facilitates being a practicing counselor. For example, personal development might include ways in which the counselor maintains a balanced lifestyle, or ways the counselor manages the stress brought on by difficult clients. A counselor lacking in personal well-being might not be considered fit to practice.

Michelle Kelley Shuler and Elizabeth A. Keller-Dupree, NCC, are Assistant Professors at Northeastern State University - Tahlequah. Correspondence can be addressed to Michelle Kelley Shuler, College of Education, Northeastern State University - Tahlequah, 705 N Grand Avenue, Tahlequah, OK 74464-2300, michelle.shuler@gmail.com.

Many counselors view counselor identity development as a process (Auxier et al., 2003; Brott & Myers, 1999) that results in congruency between personal and professional worldviews (Reisetter et al., 2004), or consider it an equal combination of professional (e.g., roles, decisions, ethics) and personal selves (e.g., values, morals, perceptions; Auxier et al., 2003). This view suggests that personal and professional development are not mutually exclusive and are just as much interrelated as dependent concepts.

Research on counselor professional identity development has examined areas such as personal or professional fit (Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007), critical incidents experienced by counselors-in-training (CITs; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006), career concerns of CITs (Busacca & Wester, 2006), evaluation of personal and professional development (Donati & Watt, 2005; Hensley, Smith, & Thompson, 2003; Lamadue & Duffey, 1999), and ways for counselor educators to address problematic behavior of trainees (Bhat, 2005; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; McAdams & Foster, 2007; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007). Furthermore, recent research has provided counselor educators with a model for professional identity development, specifying transformational tasks such as “finding a personal definition of counseling, internalizing responsibility for professional growth, and developing a systemic identity necessary for professional identity development” (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010, p. 21).

According to the transformational tasks theory proposed by Gibson et al. (2010), change happens in relation to a “transformational process across time and experience” (p. 28). From these transformational experiences, CITs evolve from reliance on external authorities (i.e., supervisors and teachers) to provide learning experiences to a position of self-validation (i.e., integrated personal and professional identity), resulting in a more internalized view of counseling and the ability to personalize understanding of experiences. The concept of counselor development evolving across time in stages and encompassing a spectrum of elements also is reflected in Skovholt & Rønnestad’s (1996) research, which suggests that counselor development explains a complex interplay between the personal and professional realms over the career span.

The incorporation of transformational learning experiences in counselor training might significantly impact both personal and professional development of CITs. The importance of a more internalized view of counseling and the ability to self-reflect (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1996) constitute significant distinctions between counselors who continue to develop versus counselors who face professional burnout and stagnation. Furthermore, lack of reflection also has been shown to have significant impact on selecting intervention strategies (McAuliffe, Eriksen, & Associates, 2002). However, few researchers have examined pedagogical methods used to enhance CITs’ level of professional development. As a result, there is a dearth of literature exploring strategies to incorporate student self-reflective experiences into counselor education in order to influence professional identity development. Counselor educators play a significant role (Griffin, 1993; Sheeley, 1986; VanZandt, 1990; Weiss, 1981) and are a key factor in counselor personal and professional development (Gibson et al., 2010; Oliver, Moore, Schoen, & Scarmon, 1989; Weiss, 1981) through the facilitation of tasks that will increase opportunities for CITs to self-evaluate, self-motivate and self-locate.

Transformational learning experiences for counselor training can be described as expressive techniques or experiential activities that facilitate CITs’ ability to express feelings and meanings related to life issues (O’Brien, 2008). Experiential activities in counselor training are applied to creative approaches in the classroom as well as in individual and group supervision (Newsome, Henderson, & Veach, 2005; Sommer & Cox, 2003; ter Maat & Bowman, 2001; Waliski, 2009; Wilkins, 1995). The inclusion of expressive arts in training assists CITs with reframing and deepening their understanding of experience (Bradley, Whiting, Hendricks, Parr, & Jones, 2008) and enhances the development of personal awareness skills (Newsome et al., 2005), functions that

are both considered highly important to professional development in models of supervision (Bernard, 1997; Holloway, 1995; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998), as well as to personal development.

Such research led the present authors to ask how counselor training programs can best assist in professional and personal identity development using transformational tasks. One suggestion is to incorporate transformational learning experiences into counselor training course work. In the current study, the authors examined the effects of transformational learning exercises on counselor professional identity development, using the professional identity development model (Gibson et al., 2010). In addition, the authors examined how the integration of transformational learning experiences (Mezirow, 1997) impacted CITs' self-reported skill development on the Professional Performance Review Policy Standards (PPRPS; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007) assessment tool and how reflective journaling impacted CITs' personal development.

Method

Participants

The current study involved 17 counseling graduate students ($N = 17$) at a Midwestern university, with eight students (47%) pursuing a specialty in clinical mental health counseling, 8 students (47%) pursuing addictions counseling and one student (6%) pursuing school counseling. One student was in the first year of graduate training (6%), 12 students (71%) were in their second year and 4 (24%) were in their third year. Four students (24%) identified as male and 13 students (76%) as female. Researchers collected demographic data only during the initial stage of data collection, or Time 1. At Times 2 and 3 of data collection, 21 students participated in the study; however, demographic data was obtained for only 17 student participants.

Instrumentation

The PPRPS (McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007) was used to evaluate participants' self-reported perceptions of their dispositions and skills. The PPRPS is a 10-item survey with each item rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The 10 dispositions and skills measured on the PPRPS include the following: (a) openness to new ideas, (b) flexibility, (c) cooperativeness with others, (d) willingness to accept and use feedback, (e) awareness of own impact on others, (f) ability to deal with conflict, (g) ability to accept personal responsibility, (h) ability to express feelings effectively and appropriately, (i) attention to ethical and legal considerations, and (j) initiative and motivation. Currently, no psychometric information is available for the PPRPS survey.

Procedure

Graduate counseling students were invited to enroll in an elective 1-hour graduate seminar. Students were notified of this opportunity via a university flyer containing the following message: "Sign up now for this new seminar opportunity which seeks to infuse creative, transformational learning exercises for personal and professional counselor growth and development into a 2-day class." As students signed up for the course, they were informed that the course would involve collecting pretest data and data from three subsequent posttests using the PPRPS survey, in which students would be asked to rate themselves on 10 counselor skills and dispositions. Students also received the opportunity to engage in a self-reflective journaling exercise that accompanied the experiential activities used throughout the seminar. Students were informed that completion of the PPRPS was mandatory for the purposes of the seminar, but that the data gleaned from the surveys and self-reflective journals would only be used for the purposes of this study with their informed consent.

The seminar consisted of a 2-day class in which various counselor development topics were taught and activities were facilitated. The activities were regarded as *transformational learning opportunities* or

experiences, and students were told that the purpose of the seminar was to infuse the didactic content of counselor development with creative, hands-on learning opportunities. Following the facilitation of each activity, students were invited to reflect on their experiences through electronic journaling in the university computer lab. The following section outlines the structure of the seminar across both days for all participants:

1. Discussion of professional development, including CACREP core curriculum requirements for graduate-level counselor training;
2. Discussion of developing the counselor professional identity across training and clinical experiences;
3. Discussion of the role of counselor educators and supervisors;
4. Discussion of professional fit, critical incidents in counselor training and career concerns of CITs;
5. Discussion of research into models of professional identity development including transformational tasks;
6. Discussion of the role of self-reflection in counselor personal and professional development;
7. Discussion of CIT self-efficacy;
8. Facilitation of transformational learning experience 1: True north activity;
9. Discussion of wellness and self-care in counselor training;
10. Facilitation of transformational learning experience 2: Puzzling wellness activity;
11. Discussion of the use of music as an expressive art in counseling practice;
12. Facilitation of transformational learning experience 3: Lyrics to my life activity;
13. Discussion of the use of cinematherapy in counseling practice;
14. Transformational learning experience 4: Viewing of the movie *Prayers for Bobby*, and facilitation of discussion following viewing the movie;
15. Discussion of values as a determinant of counseling theory and practice;
16. Facilitation of transformational learning experience 5: Values bench activity; and
17. Final post-seminar discussion of experiences.

(For a full explanation of each transformational learning exercise facilitated in the seminar, please contact the first author).

Students completed the PPRPS pretest, demographic sheet and informed consent prior to arriving at the seminar on day 1. The PPRPS pretest data collection will be referred to as Time 1 data. The demographic sheet included a personal 4-digit code (for participant anonymity) and gathered information about the counseling specialty track in which the participants were enrolled, their year in the counseling program and their gender. Students completed the PPRPS posttest at the start of the seminar on day 1, subsequently referred to as Time 2 data. Throughout the 2 days, students completed five transformational learning experience activities and reflected on each through electronic journaling following each activity. Students were asked to save their reflective journals and submit them to the principal investigator at the end of the 2-day seminar. At the end of day 2, students completed the PPRPS posttest again, subsequently referred to as Time 3 data. In addition, students wrote down the two most meaningful transformational learning experiences of the 2-day seminar, to be used in a frequency count by the researchers. Approximately 3 months following the completion of the seminar, students completed the PPRPS posttest for the final data collection time point, subsequently referred to as Time 4 data. Researchers kept all student data confidential at each data collection time point through the use of the personal 4-digit codes. Electronic journals were submitted by students to the principal investigator via a protected email server and saved in a password-protected file for review and coding.

Results

A one-way, within-group, repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare students' self-reported professional performance using the PPRPS before, during and after the seminar. The comparison was conducted using the mean PPRPS score for all participants at Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4. Nine participants did not submit PPRPS results at a minimum of one data collection time point and therefore were

not included in the analysis. As such, 12 participants were included in the analysis of all four data time points (57% of participants). Results indicated that participants' levels of self-reported professional performance scores were not statistically significantly different over time, $F(3, 9) = .83, p = .51$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$. Although while the results across the four data collection time points were not significantly different, further evaluation of the data showed an increase in self-reported professional performance on the PPRPS across each data collection point. Mean data for the PPRPS across the four data collection time points can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for All Data Collection Time Points

Time	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	17	39.94	5.26
2	21	40.52	5.00
3	20	41.55	5.29
4	16	42.94	4.68

To explore the movement in the data further, the researchers completed an item analysis for descriptive statistics of all 10 PPRPS items across the four data collection time points. Results of the item analysis supported a positive movement in scores for all 10 areas assessed on the PPRPS, with the most meaningful movement in the data occurring in the following items: (a) Item 7: Ability to accept personal responsibility (+.62 from Time 1 to Time 4), (b) Item 2: Flexibility (+.49) and (c) Item 5: Awareness of my own impact on others (+.48). Table 2 highlights the mean data for each of the 10 PPRPS items across the four data time points.

Table 2

Item Analysis of PPRPS Survey

Item	Time 1 ^a		Time 2 ^b		Time 3 ^c		Time 4 ^d	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Openness to new ideas	4.00	0.87	4.00	0.77	4.30	0.8	4.31	0.79
2: Flexibility	3.76	0.90	3.95	0.67	4.20	0.77	4.25	0.93
3: Cooperativeness with others	4.24	0.75	4.24	0.70	4.30	0.57	4.25	0.58
4: Willingness to accept and use feedback	4.00	0.61	4.29	0.64	4.20	0.7	4.38	0.72
5: Awareness of own impact on others	3.71	0.85	3.67	0.73	3.80	0.77	4.19	0.91
6: Ability to deal with conflict	3.76	0.83	3.76	0.83	4.00	0.65	4.13	1.02
7: Ability to accept personal responsibility	3.88	0.70	4.20	0.77	4.20	0.83	4.50	0.63
8: Ability to express feelings effectively and appropriately	3.82	0.81	3.81	0.73	4.20	0.83	4.13	0.72
9: Attention to ethical and legal considerations	4.29	0.85	4.24	0.89	4.05	0.83	4.31	0.87
10: Initiative and motivation	4.47	0.62	4.33	0.66	4.30	0.80	4.50	0.73

^a*n* = 17. ^b*n* = 21. ^c*n* = 20. ^d*n* = 16.

Qualitative Analysis

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the transformational learning experiences, the researchers conducted a qualitative analysis of the reflective journals for each participant across each activity. A grounded theory design was used to assess the data, with which an emerging theory could become evident for the use of transformational learning experiences in counselor training. Each participant's journal entry following each transformational learning experience was coded for common themes from open (broad) to axial (narrowed) to selective codes across all five activities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Prior to exploring commonalities and themes across the data, both researchers completed the open and axial coding process separately. Both researchers kept journals with reflective commentary throughout the seminar and coding process to identify, explore and process their emerging awareness, assumptions and biases. Following individual coding, the researchers collaborated to explore the emerging (selective) themes that were present in the data, as well as to further process self-understandings noted within the reflective commentary. Once the researchers identified the final selective codes, they used a member check to serve as a final trustworthiness measure to support the credibility of the findings, in which they invited three study participants to review their submitted journal transcripts to see if the overarching findings of the study accurately reflected their words.

Overarching Themes

Activities led to awareness of past and present challenges. Participants reflected that through the use of transformational learning experiences, they became more in touch with the past and present struggles they had encountered in their life journeys. One participant shared after completing the lyrics to my life activity, "I guess this means that the pain is sometimes still raw and close to the surface, although I haven't thought about it in months." Another participant noted, "As painful and troubled as that time of my life may have been, it did serve a purpose." After the true north activity, a third participant said, "Anxiety, responsibilities, time/money constraints, and other people's standards are my magnetic north." In the same activity, one participant created a metaphor for her struggle and noted, "A picture of an army platoon was graced under the clock and weighed heavily on this magnetic pole. I believe it spoke to my affiliation with war. . . . It might represent my own inner conflicts." Similarly, another participant stated, "This exercise provided me with a deep look at the small elements in my life that pull me off course. . . . My biggest accomplishment today was seeing my failures on paper." When watching *Prayers for Bobby*, many participants explored the impact of discrimination, prejudice and judgment within their own lives. One participant shared, "I have experienced this type of constant condemnation from my grandma." Another noted, "I can also relate to Bobby's feelings of shame and not belonging as I felt some of that growing up, even the point of 'what's the use?'" With the values bench activity, one participant explored family conflict and noted the following about her father: "We have always had a very rocky relationship. . . . The message I got from him was I was not good enough to be his daughter." Across all activities, participants recognized past and present struggles, challenges and conflict that impact their lives.

Activities revealed the need for change. As the participants became aware of past and present struggles through the transformational learning experiences, they also began to express the need for growth and change. One participant shared in the true north activity that "understanding the paths that may be challenging for me can help me have a resolution." In the same activity, another participant stated the following:

Being able to point out the stressors and the negative impacts of things that try to take away from me as a whole and who I am trying to become made it much easier for me to see what I need to work on and what I need to eliminate from my life.

Another participant noted, “I’ve got to break that cycle. . . . I have to let go of the distractors and truly take ownership of my situation.” Similarly, a participant stated in the puzzling wellness activity, “This activity brought out my desires and in a way reinforced my need to stay on target of what I want.” Another shared, “This exercise helped me to identify that I need to find more time to establish a better balance for all elements of wellness in my life.” After watching *Prayers for Bobby*, one participant described her need for better understanding and stated, “I am the only one who can live my life for me and directly suffer the consequences or reap the rewards.” When completing the values bench activity, one participant explored the impact of family struggle in her life and how the activity facilitated her desire to grow and move forward. She wrote, “I don’t mean that I want to win a Nobel peace prize or invent something unbelievable. . . . I simply mean to overcome the battles and issues within my family and get everyone on the same page.” Another participant shared, “What this assignment has done for me personally is to stop and think before I act at home, school, and work because the way you act and treat people is the legacy you will leave behind.” In realizing personal struggles, participants became aware of room for growth and change. The activities sparked discussions of how that growth and development could begin for the participants.

Group processing continued self-exploration and connection. It became apparent across the reflective journals that the participants felt connected to the small group processing that followed each transformational learning experience. Time and again, the participants relayed the relief they felt, as well as the ability to process more deeply when sharing their creative expression with others. In the lyrics to my life activity, a participant shared, “I really enjoyed this assignment and sharing my story with the group,” and another noted, “This activity brought out much emotion in most people that shared today. We all struggle.” One participant explained in the puzzling wellness activity, “I did feel better once we presented our puzzles to our groups. It was nice to see what other people struggle with and how they represent themselves.” Another student stated, “I enjoyed processing the work, which actually turned into a very interesting conversation.” One participant offered the awareness that emerged from processing as she shared the following: “As we processed, I noticed that I felt very content in my life and this often comes when I hear where others are in their own life.” In the true north activity, one participant discussed her “strong emotional reaction” and said, “I wasn’t fully aware of just how visceral the feelings I had about them [were]. I felt anger, disgust and even shame when processing with my group.” Another shared, “I had a little break down trying to explain it to my classmates, but it made me realize how this is important and a part of me.” After watching *Prayers for Bobby*, one participant noted, “This was a great movie and I think the reflection after with the group was powerful. The movie affected everyone in different ways; being able to relax and share our thoughts as a class was so important and refreshing.” Through the group discussion process, participants offered a glimpse into the self-exploration that this interpersonal opportunity facilitated. Participants voiced the normalcy and empathy that were promoted through group self-disclosure and how this processing opportunity deepened their awareness.

Activities became useful interventions for future counseling practice. Across all activities, participants noted the usefulness, relevance and effectiveness of creative interventions for their future professional counseling practice. After watching *Prayers for Bobby*, one participant said, “I have never thought about using film as a therapeutic tool . . . but now my mind is spinning with ideas.” In the same activity, another shared, “This movie could be helpful in the field with families who are struggling to find acceptance.” In the true north activity, one participant stated, “This assignment was very beneficial and it’s something I would definitely use in the future with my clients as well as with myself.” In the puzzling wellness activity, one participant said, “I would recommend this activity to someone that deals with low self-esteem.” In the same activity, another student shared, “I can see how this activity may be useful with a client who has not thought along the lines of wholeness and wellness.” In the lyrics to my life activity, one participant explained, “I will try to incorporate

some of these learning tools with my clients,” while another student noted, “Great activity. Several ‘ah ha’ moments. This could be a powerful tool with a client.” Following the values bench activity, one participant shared, “I will also add this to my clinical techniques during session.” In each activity, the participants were able to articulate the utility and application of these transformational experiences not just for themselves, but for their future counseling clients as well.

Discussion

The current study’s researchers explored the impact of transformational learning experiences and reflective journaling on the personal and professional development of CITs who completed a 2-day seminar in a university setting. Results reflected an increase in each of the 10 areas of professional development across the four data time points, though findings were not statistically significant.

Professional development is meaningful for promoting best practice in counselor training and development. Results of this study show gradual improvement in professional development, mirroring the results of Gibson et al. (2010) and indicating that professional development occurs over time and through experience. Both studies shed light on the progression from “reliance on external (classroom and expert) teachings and validation to a more internalized view of counseling and self-validation” (Gibson et al., 2010, p. 33). Interestingly, the items showing the greatest improvement reflect (a) the ability to accept personal responsibility, (b) flexibility and (c) awareness of personal impact on others. One could argue that these three factors also are reflected in the following transformational tasks from Gibson et al. (2010): (a) finding a personal definition of counseling, (b) internalizing responsibility for professional growth, and (c) developing a systemic identity necessary for professional identity development.

The qualitative analysis of the reflective journals lends rich support to the use of transformational learning experiences for enhancing and promoting personal and professional development. Participants noted that through these activities, they became aware of past and present challenges, the need for change, the impact of processing within a group, and the application of transformational activities in clinical practices. Such findings provide justification for how transformational learning experiences, particularly through the use of reflective journaling, might influence personal development of CITs. The themes identified above, such as awareness of past and present challenges and the need for change, indicate that participation in such activities provides an opportunity for self-examination, which leads to identification of areas in need of personal attention. Finally, the remaining themes identified relate to the use of transformational activities in future counseling practice. These themes are representative of the integration of personal and professional development identified by Skovholt and Rønnestad (1996).

An interesting emergence from the qualitative data is that participants not only recognized challenges inherent to living, but that they also saw themselves as the vehicle for change. Across each activity, participants were aware of the need of personal and professional growth and development. Blonna (2010) wrote that one reasonable response to personal challenge is to “focus on the positive things that can result from taking on a potential stressor. When you feel challenged, you look at a situation for its growth potential or for what you might gain from the challenge” (p. 10). Participants in the study reflected on their desire to grow and change as much as they reflected on the situation that led to the struggle. They voiced their desire to see challenges as obstacles worth overcoming. Doing so could be the beginning of an evolving personal journey that deepens their experience and informs a more competent counseling practice in the future.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

A notable limitation to the study was the limited number of participants. Furthermore, students in counselor education programs are asked to intrapersonally and interpersonally reflect on their development within a number of courses and learning experiences. As such, it would be misguided to assume that improvements in professional development across a semester were only due to the contribution of a 2-day seminar.

Additionally, results from data in the current study did not support a statistically significant impact in professional development, though a meaningful trend in the data was revealed. The findings must not be overgeneralized; however, the findings can be used to articulate the benefits that the students noted through the self-reported inventory. A follow-up study is currently underway to replicate the original study and identify commonalities as well as differences in findings with another cohort of graduate counseling students.

Conclusions

As counselor educators, the authors believe that CITs benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of themselves, which in turn can positively impact their personal and professional growth. As indicated in the literature related to counselor identity development, the authors are not alone in thinking that greater self-awareness is connected to increased competence on both personal and professional levels. However, at times counselor training curriculum lacks emphasis on self-awareness and would benefit from increasing opportunities for students to engage in self-reflective and experiential activities. The incorporation of transformational exercises into counselor training curriculum can encourage and enhance positive counselor identity development. In participating in these exercises, CITs deepen their intrapersonal and interpersonal learning and developmental journey, thus potentially enriching the counseling relationship, skills and techniques they will eventually use with future clients.

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