

Currere as Method for Developing Multicultural and Social Awareness Skills

Counselor educators must teach students to develop skills in multicultural and social awareness, responsiveness, and advocacy (MSARA), but research surrounding the best pedagogical approach for this instruction is lacking. *Currere* is a method that students and instructors can use to improve multicultural awareness, begin the process of thinking for later conversations, and understand positionality in curriculum in relation to personal and professional identity and the socio-cultural realities that exist. The content of the *currere* prepares students for future lessons and provides them a tool for reflection when complicated ideas occur in the future.

FRANCESCA M. GARZA-FRAIRE¹ &
MARCELLA D. STARK²

¹Liffrig Family School of Education & Behavioral Sciences, University of Mary

²Department of Counseling, Societal Change & Inquiry, Texas Christian University

Author Note:

¹Francesca M. Garza-Fraire, ORCID #0000-0002-1600-0983

²Marcella D. Stark, ORCID #0000-0003-4263-1487

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Correspondence concerning this practice brief should be addressed to Francesca M. Garza-Fraire, School of Education & Behavioral Sciences, University of Mary, 7500 University Drive, Bismarck, ND 58504, United States. Email: fmfraire@umary.edu

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Students develop skills in MSARA as these skills are essential to providing ethical mental health services to culturally- and socially- diverse communities (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue, 2001; Sue et al., 1982). Before students can respond and advocate appropriately, they must develop self-awareness and contextual orientation. Positive correlations exist between multicultural competency and a clinician's multicultural self-awareness and ethnic identification as a cultural being (Atkins et al., 2017; CACREP, 2016; Matthews et al., 2018). Specifically, counselors who are aware of their cultural heritage and background recognize the impact that their history has on personal bias and the counseling relationship (Matthews et al., 2018). Developing such awareness is complex, and counseling students, who often have little experience with diversity and marginalization, tend to struggle with discomfort and resistance when discussing topics of racism, privilege, and systemic implications of these realities (Atkins et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2018). In contrast, students of color may struggle to find connections in the classroom or relevance in the existing course materials (CACREP, 2016; Chan et al., 2018).

Existing research, accreditation standards, and the growing diversity in America all point to a need for the development of MSARA skills, but knowledge surrounding the best pedagogical approach for this instruction is lacking (Atkins et al., 2017; Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Chan et al., 2018; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Hilert & Tirado, 2019; Pieterse et al., 2009; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018; Vannatta & Steen, 2019; Vannatta & Vannatta, 2021). Some researchers suggest instructors make room in the course curriculum for student exploration and dialogue regarding their ethnic identity, racialized experiences, oppression, and privilege (Chan, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2017). Other researchers suggest that engaging in reflective or autobiographical writing (Ziomek-Daigle, 2017) can deepen understanding of both multicultural content and personal reactions related to this content and proves beneficial to counseling students (Davidson & Schmidt, 2014).

THE *CURRERE* METHOD

Pinar (2012) describes curriculum theory as a complicated conversation between learner and content. In this conversation, both the learner and instructor (e.g., practitioners) engage with the course materials, consider it, create a response to it, reflect on their personal experiences of it, and formulate language to expand upon, question, and understand the content more carefully within the context of the classroom (Pinar, 2004). The method of *currere* mobilizes curriculum theory and produces an understanding of the practitioner in relation to others (Jung, 2016). With *currere*, instructors reflect on their orientation to a given curriculum in relation to personal and contextual realities to gain insight and create similar learning opportunities

for students. The word curriculum comes from a Latin word meaning “racetrack” and *currere* means “the running of the race” (Huddleston, 2018; Jung, 2016; Pinar, et al., 2000; Wang, 2010). *Currere* is what happens when practitioners interact with theory and course content concerning the many constructs of life (e.g., society, politics, culture). Thus, *currere* creates an opportunity for praxis that is authentic to the practitioner.

To address the need for a pedagogical approach that facilitates the development of MSARA skills, we propose the use of an adapted version of *currere*. This approach offers an integrative method of reflective instruction that invites a learner’s diversity, complexity, and individuality to interact with other participants and their unique collection of experiences in relation to existing social and cultural realities. The *currere* process begins with personal and autobiographical reflections (Jung, 2016). Then, learners take individual *currere* reflections and enter collaborative classroom conversations. Through this conversation, learners and educators alike construct individualized meaning through writing and then work collaboratively to discuss the course content and the formation of individual and collective professional identity (Gehart, 2007; Gergen, 2015; Pinar, 2011; Pinar & Grumet, 2015). *Currere* is a kind of reflective practice that turns one’s gaze both inward and outward through questioning and meaning-making (Huddleston, 2018). It has the potential to identify student needs through self and collective assessment, as well as to provide students with valuable opportunities and insight for growth.

Constructivist teaching methods like *currere* create less hierarchy because student contribution and conversation are as much a part of the learning process as the teacher’s instruction. Such an environment creates an opportunity for rich, relevant dialogue and collective meaning-making regarding course content rather than a student’s passive acceptance of content (Gergen, 2015; Glasersfeld, 1995; Pinar, 2011). *Currere* also prepares counseling students to work with diverse clients through practice in reflection, dialogue, and listening, thus improving the cognitive complexity and contextual self-awareness necessary for building MSARA skills (Chan et al., 2018; Davidson & Schmidt, 2014; 2003; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). These characteristics make *currere* a good fit for an introduction to multicultural counseling class.

Currere as an Instructional Strategy

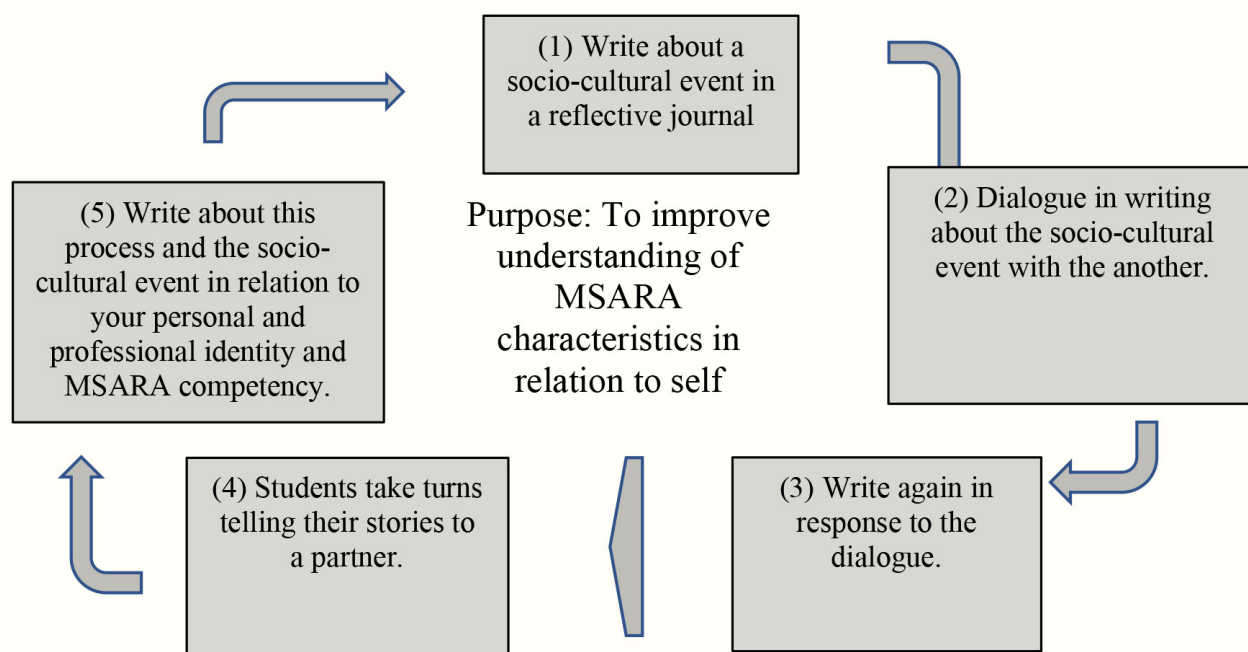
Pinar intended for *currere* to de-emphasize the power of imposed curriculum and instead emphasize the learner’s experience within the course content (Jung, 2016). This instructional strategy is a modification of *currere* where counselors will integrate their unconscious or conscious experiences with the competency standards for MSARA and the course content that supports the acquisition of those competencies. Pinar also hoped to de-emphasize standardization and assessment with *currere* (Pinar, 2004; Pinar & Grumet, 2015). Although we present the value of *currere* for formative assessment, the assessment functions as a guided self-evaluation tool for student’s personal and professional growth. Respect for *currere* and Pinar’s intentions for its intended use are important considerations when adapting this idea to a classroom lesson.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS

Instructors can expect to spend approximately 75 minutes per lesson over a course of three class meetings. The learning process includes the following: (a) an autobiographical turn or a guided reflective writing about one of the learner's past cultural or social experiences, (b) written dialogue with another, (c) a progressive turn or a write again that includes considerations for future professional practice, (d) an analytic turn or student dialogue that re-orient the learner in the present while discussing the past and the future implications of the in-process learning, and (e) a synthetic turn that considers the larger context of professional standards in relation to the learner's experience with currere through self-assessment. This instructional model, portrayed in Figure 1, is an adaptation of Pinar's method of currere, and includes: (a) an autobiographical turn to the past, (b) a progressive turn toward an imagined future, (c) an analytical turn to past, present, and future, and (d) a synthetical turn that considers the larger social and political context (Jung, 2016; Pinar, 2004).

Figure 1

Adapted Currere Learning Process



LESSON ONE: WRITE

The instructor introduces currere by sharing samples and then by sharing a portion of their own currere writing. This part of the activity is an ethical approach to normalize the sharing of personal experience for reflection and collective learning through modeling (Yoon et al.,

2014). Additionally, by engaging in currere, instructors actively work on their own MSARA skills, which are essential to effective teaching (Chan et al., 2018). Following this introduction, students spend approximately 20-25 minutes and respond to the writing prompts as follows:

1. Describe a memory of when you became more aware of your social and cultural identity.
2. How was this experience racialized and/or normalized?
3. Did power or privilege influence this experience? Please explain.
4. How might this experience impact your identity as a counselor?

Following the writing time, students take a break and come back and sit in a circle for discussion. The instructor leads this discussion and focuses on the students' experiences, questions, and considerations during this writing activity. The suggested script for this activity is as follows:

Instructor: *Thank you for participating in the currere reflective writing activity. As we begin our discussion, I want to remind you of our commitment to confidentiality in this classroom. I also want to encourage all of us, me included, to remain in an authenticating stance and provide one another with radical listening and acceptance concerning each person's contributions. I know discussions concerning social and cultural experiences can bring about difficult feelings. I encourage you to remain engaged, curious, responsive, and respectful. However, if you need to take some time and care for yourself, please do this. Someone will follow you and check on you. I hope you will return, but either way, I will check in with you after class to see how I can best support your learning process. Although I will give you discussion prompts, I encourage you to contribute. Let's see what we can learn from one another and this process.*

Once the instructor receives an acknowledgment from students that they are aware of the expectations and are ready to participate, they may begin the conversation.

Instructor: *To begin, I would like to know what it was like to write about a memory when you became more aware of your social and cultural identity.*

The instructor will allow students to contribute as they feel comfortable and engage in the conversation as appropriate. When this conversation comes to a natural ending, the instructor will give the following conversation prompt.

Instructor: *Although it is expected and reasonable to have discomfort when discussing issues of race, power, and privilege, student safety during these lessons is essential. On a scale from 1 to 10, 10 is the safest, how safe are you feeling following your writing and conversations today? Please write this number in your reflective journal and circle it, so that I know how you are feeling.*

Instructor: *With this number in mind, consider what might improve your rating by one point? Please share your ideas if you would like.*

Instructors may contribute to this conversation as appropriate. When the discussion comes to an end, the instructor will give a preview of lesson two of the currere reflection and end the lesson with the following question,

Instructor: *What are your best hopes for this lesson? Please take a moment and write your response in your reflective journal.*

When students finish writing, allow them an opportunity to share if they would like.

LESSON TWO: WRITE AGAIN

In preparation for the next lesson, the instructor will read the students' reflective writings and write encouraging comments or curiosities in the margins. The notations encourage the student to engage further in their writing and enter a dialogue or the currere process of collaboration (Huddleston, 2018). Examples of notes include: "tell me more about...," "what is that like...," and "what else...?" However, the comments never correct or assume, but instead support and encourage the student to explore. The instructor will give the students their reflections with the instructor's notes at the beginning of class. After students have an opportunity to read the comments, the instructor will give the class 15-20 minutes to write again in their currere reflection.

At the end of the "write again" section of the lesson, students will work with a partner. Partners can be assigned randomly or by student choice. It is helpful for some students to make this a flexible choice. Once the students have a partner, the instructor will give directions as follows:

For the next part of the lesson, you will all have an opportunity to share a piece of your story from the currere reflective writing exercise. You get to choose how much you share. Listeners, just a reminder that you will practice an authenticating stance that demonstrates radical listening and acceptance. Simply, believe their story at face value, stay curious, and do your best not to rescue or to minimize the speaker's experience. Provide empathy, reflection, and unconditional positive regard.

Students will spend 15 minutes each telling their partner about their currere reflections. The instructor will use a timer to signal when it is time to switch and give a 5-minute warning. Following the discussions, students will take a break and return to a circle for closing dialogue. The instructor will remind students of the group safety norms and expectations and lead the group in discussion with questions as follows:

To begin, I would like to know what it was like to share a memory when you became more aware of your social and cultural identity.

Once students have shared, the instructor will move on to the following questions:

What difference did it make to tell your story vs. write it?

What was it like to listen to your partner's story?

The instructor will allow students to contribute as they feel comfortable and engage in the conversation as appropriate. When this conversation comes to a natural ending, the instructor will give the following conversation prompts:

Although expected and reasonable, discomfort when discussing issues of race, power, and privilege may occur. To gauge safety levels, we will use the following safety score scale. On a scale from 1 to 10, 10 is the safest, how safe are you feeling following today's writing and conversations? Please write this number in your reflective journal and circle it, so that I know how you are feeling.

With this number in mind, consider what might improve your rating by one point? I invite you to share your ideas if you would like.

When students are finished sharing, the instructor will give the following conversation prompt:

What differences exist between your ratings from the first to the second lesson? You may share if you are willing.

When the discussion comes to an end, the instructor will give a preview of lesson three of the currere reflection and end the lesson with the following question:

What outcomes have you experienced from this lesson that might benefit your future work as a counselor?

LESSON THREE: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

In lesson three, the instructor allows students an opportunity to assess their MSARA skills. Students will write whatever comes to mind, paying little attention to grammar. Students will spend 30 minutes responding in writing to the prompts as follows:

1. What was it like to write about a social or cultural experience?
2. What was it like to write again in dialogue with the instructor about your social or cultural experience?
3. What was it like to share your written reflection in conversation?
4. What was difficult or challenging?
5. What was beneficial?
6. What were your safety scores? Please explain your reasons for your scores.
7. How will you use what you have learned from this lesson in your future counseling practice?
8. What new knowledge do you have specifically due to this activity, and how will it help you with the rest of this course?
9. What other words would you use to describe this lesson?

Following the students' reflective writing time, the instructor will introduce the characteristics of MSARA development. To evaluate the development of MSARA skills, students will identify the themes in their own written currere reflections. Students will submit these self-evaluations in the reflective journal for the instructor to view. This activity serves as a formative assessment of student learning. Students will search for themes of awareness, responsiveness, advocacy, and social and cultural constructs (Choate & Granello, 2006; Wang, 2010). Definitions to assist students as they identify the characteristics in their writing are as follows:

Awareness

Awareness is the multicultural/social self-awareness and ethnic identification as a cultural being in relation to the diverse population who can identify complicated experiences, detect personal bias, and adequately work through complex responses for improved professionalism (Atkins et al., 2017; Chan, et al., 2015; CACREP, 2016; Matthews et al., 2018).

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the ethical application of professional skills while considering the impacts of the cultural identity of the clinician and those with whom the clinician works. Responsive student clinicians can recognize and respond to the complexity of racism, oppression, and social injustice within the counseling relationship (Atkins et al., 2016; Chan, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2016; Ratts et al., 2016).

Advocacy

Advocacy as a competency is present when students recognize the importance of the professional counselors' role in advocacy and social justice and integrate it into their professional counseling practice.

Social and Cultural Constructs

Students recognize and identify the social and cultural constructs that intersect with ethnic identity and historical incidents of racism while building an awareness of existing biases (Chan 2018; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A student's perceived safety is highly important in this instructional setting. Discomfort occurs as counseling students and educators work to identify and discuss the systems of power within society as part of MSARA skill development (Atkins et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2018; Fier & Ramsey, 2005). With student safety as a priority, the use of intentional safeguards protects the students' experience while challenging them to work through expected discomfort and construct a deeper awareness of the social and cultural constructs that shape identity (Chan et al., 2018). To prepare students for uncomfortable conversations, discussions about risks, confidentiality, mutual respect, and the qualities of good listening should take place

prior to the lesson. Good listening looks like an authenticating stance; radical listening and nonjudgmental acceptance tolerate ambiguity and discomfort without rescuing or minimizing (de Shazer, 1997; Stark et al, 2021; Weingarten, 1995).

INSTRUCTOR REFLEXIVITY

The cultural competency of the instructor and the levels of trust and developmental maturity among the students within the classroom is crucial for this lesson (Chan et al., 2018). To reinforce the safety of the students, instructors should work on their reflective practice in currere to improve MSARA skills (Chan et al., 2018; Yoon & Kordesh, 2014). Consultation should also be ongoing to mitigate concerns that may arise (Yoon & Kordesh, 2014). Additionally, lesson one can also be used as an assessment tool to gauge the readiness of the students for advancement to lesson two, when students might experience more vulnerability when sharing their experience with a classmate.

RESOURCES AND SUPPLIES

Students will need the following: (a) a notebook and a pen or pencil, and (b) reading materials that explain the essence of an authenticating stance and radical acceptance and listening. See the reference list for resources (e.g., de Shazer, 1997; Roth, 1999; Stark et. al, 2021; Weingarten, 1995) and currere samples (e.g., Brown, 2018; Huddleston, 2018; Poetter, 2018). Additionally, The Currere Exchange (<https://www.currereexchange.com>) offers resources and many samples of currere reflections for review. Instructors do not need formalized training but will benefit from reading currere samples and practicing currere writing and reflectivity prior to inviting students to participate in the lesson.

Evaluation and Assessment

Student feedback and assessment of learning objectives are the primary tools for evaluating the effectiveness of this teaching strategy. Student ratings of safety will indicate if a classroom climate was created to allow for potentially difficult conversations to take place. Furthermore, the content of the reflective journals provides the instructor with information regarding each student's responses to the lesson, as well as assessment of their MSARA characteristic demonstration (i.e., student learning). In lesson three, the instructor guides students through this self-assessment. The process of the currere prepares students for future lessons on multicultural competency and provides them with a tool for reflection when complicated ideas occur in the future.

Questions & Implications for Research

A preliminary understanding of the benefits of currere in a diversity classroom exists. In one dissertation study (Garza-Fraire, 2022), students reported increased awareness, positive interactions, and appreciation of time to reflect, and they described the lesson using words like good, important, meaningful, helpful, and interesting. Additionally, students felt the time they spent telling and hearing one another's stories was valuable for the clinical work they will do in the future. Many students felt thankful for the new perspectives and nuances they experienced. Despite their discomfort, students focused on the value of the currere lesson and were overwhelmingly grateful to participate. Finally, the MSARA characteristics used for the students' self-evaluation emerged from the dissertation study's data and points to the beginning stages of empirical support for the value of this lesson (Garza-Fraire, 2022).

Questions remain regarding this method of instruction in the context of counselor education. Future research should examine how this approach would benefit diverse populations and online counseling programs, and a variety of course types and class sizes (Yoon & Kordesh, 2014). Researchers may also investigate the impact of an instructor's social and cultural identity, training, or personal MSARA competency on the outcomes of the lesson. Finally, future inquiries might look at the benefit of student currere reflections as aids for the much-needed conceptualization and mobilization of MSARA as intentional and collective activism (Chan et al., 2018; Yoon & Kordesh, 2014). Overall, currere provides a guidance tool for reflective practice. Reflective practice is present in much of the counselor education literature as essential to the professional counseling practice (Ziomiek-Daigle, 2017). Future research and practice in this area will expand our understanding of currere in the diversity classroom.

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