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## **Comments**

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# Students' Perspectives of Experiential Learning in an Addictions Course

Tammi F. Dice, Kristy L. Carlisle, Rebekah Byrd

■ Substance use practitioners may identify as individuals in recovery, while others may have never experienced the challenge of abstinence. Without this lived experience, it may be difficult to accurately empathize with clients in recovery. Experiential learning is a way for students to live through an exercise in abstinence. The value of utilizing experiential learning for skill development and theory application is established. However, there is no empirical research examining the use of experiential learning with undergraduate substance use practitioner trainees not in recovery from addiction to increase their ability to empathize with clients' experiences. This article explores the impact of an experiential learning assignment in an undergraduate addictions course. A qualitative analysis of students' written reflections revealed four primary themes. The authors offer suggestions for substance use educators and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** addictions training, addictions course, substance use practitioners, experiential learning

Addiction to legal and illicit substances in the United States is a pervasive issue (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2017). The NIDA (2015) determined that 17.3 million Americans (i.e., 6.6% of the population) experienced addiction to alcohol or problematic use in 2013, indicating a pervasive area of concern in society and in the helping professions (SAMHSA, 2017). Among illicit drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, prescription drugs, hallucinogens, inhalants, and heroin, marijuana has been found to be the most commonly used

(NIDA, 2015), with an estimated 4.2 million Americans meeting the criteria for a marijuana use disorder (NIDA, 2015). Most recently, opioid addiction has been deemed an epidemic in the United States, with overdose deaths having quadrupled since 1999 (DHHS, 2016). The extensive and growing nature of addiction issues in the U.S. population has led to increasing opportunities to work as a substance use professional (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In fact, the projected growth of this career between 2014 and 2024 was reported as 22%, which is much higher than average.

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Despite the high prevalence of substance use disorders and the growth in the field of addiction treatment, only 18.5% of those in need of treatment have received it (NIDA, 2015). Furthermore, researchers have found that approximately 34–45% of individuals drop out of treatment before three months (Palmer, Murphy, Piselli, & Ball, 2009; Staiger et al., 2014). Likewise, researchers have found that between 40% and 60% of individuals relapse following treatment (NIDA, 2012). There is a need for greater efforts to promote enlistment in addiction treatment, prevent truancy, and increase treatment effectiveness. Providing high-quality addiction treatment practitioners is one area of focus to address the challenges of relapse and treatment dropout.

### Addiction Practitioners

A primary variable in high-quality addiction treatment is an addiction professional who has knowledge of addictions and strong helping skills, including rapport building and empathy (Doukas, 2015; Moyers & Miller, 2013). Much of the research in the field of addictions has focused on whether a practitioner's recovery status is related to how empathic they can be to others experiencing addictions (e.g., Doukas, 2015; Libretto, Weil, Nemes, Linder, & Johansson, 2004; Toriello & Strohmer, 2004; Whitter, 2006). Some research has indicated that being in recovery is not necessary for practitioners to be effective (Libretto et al., 2004; Toriello & Strohmer, 2004). In a review of studies assessing client outcomes, Hser (1995) found no differences in recovering and non-recovering counselors' skills and effectiveness. More recently, in a national survey of individuals receiving addiction counseling, Wolff and Hayes (2009) found no differences between recovering and non-recovering professionals in terms of their effectiveness or perceived ability to meet clients' needs.

This research is important since a large percentage of substance use practitioners have not experienced addiction and recovery. The rate of addiction practitioners in recovery themselves dropped from

approximately 60% in the 1980s to approximately 45% in the 1990s and early 2000s (White, 2004, 2009). The Association for Addiction Professionals (NAADAC, 2012) estimated that between 25% and 65% of addiction specialists identified as being in recovery.

However, for decades, experts in the field have spoken of the value of addiction treatment practitioners who themselves are in recovery (Bell, 1973; Doukas, 2015; Lawson, 1982; Owen, 2000). Researchers have found that directly experiencing the challenges related to addiction, recovery, and abstinence gave practitioners an enhanced ability to relate to clients' recovery processes and better meet their needs (Doukas, 2015; Stoffelmayr, Mavis, & Kasim, 1998; Whitter, 2006). The shared experience has been linked to increased empathy (Moyers & Miller, 2013), which is needed to form strong relationships with clients and honor their personal stories (Neukrug, 2017).

Conversely, practitioners who have not experienced addiction have been found to be less empathic and to utilize a narrower range of treatment techniques in their work with people with substance use disorders (Bylsma, 2010; Stoffelmayr et al., 1998). Researchers have reported that some helping professionals negatively stigmatized clients with substance addiction, viewing use and relapse as a choice or moral failing (Chasek, Jorgensen & Maxon, 2012; Room, 2009; Van, Eliason, Freudenberg, & Barnes, 2009). These assumptions may lead to a lack of understanding and support and even to inferiorizing, disrespectful interactions (Ballon & Skinner, 2008; Hayes et al., 2004). This kind of interaction with a professional can cause harm to people attempting to overcome addiction, making the maintenance of sobriety even more challenging (Ballon & Skinner, 2008; Crabb & Linton, 2007; Hayes et al., 2004).

While research on the effectiveness of recovery status in the addiction treatment field is conflicting, it does not minimize the importance of promoting competence among substance use practitioners. To ward against insensitive or even harmful treatment, substance use pedagogy that includes deliberate empathy training for addiction practitioner trainees may

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promote the ability to meet the needs of the clients with whom they will work. By addressing unresolved questions and concerns about the population during training, supervision, and field experience, trainees enhance their ability to empathically connect with their clients (Giordano, Stare, & Clarke, 2015). This training is necessary at all educational levels in which addiction professionals are trained.

### Addictions Training

Most state credentialing, such as the Certified Substance Abuse Counselor (CSAC) licenses offered by the Virginia Department of Health Professions (DHP) and the North Carolina Substance Abuse Professional Practice Board (NCSAPPB), sets the minimum educational requirement at the high school (NCSAPPB, 2015) or bachelor's-degree level (DHP, 2017). Furthermore, the National Certification Commission for Addiction Professionals (NCCAP) sets its minimum requirements for a Level I National Certified Addiction Counselor at the high school level and Level II at the bachelor's level (NCCAP, 2018). While a CSAC certification is not a license, like a master's-level licensed professional counselor or licensed clinical social worker, individuals with the certification can work in an addiction treatment agency providing direct care under supervision. As such, students with a bachelor's degree in a helping field are well-suited to work in facilities that serve people with substance use disorders, particularly in light of the demand for such professionals.

Multiple universities accredited by the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE; 2017) offer undergraduate coursework in addictions. However, no studies were found on techniques used in undergraduate addiction studies courses or these courses' impact on developing empathy in addiction practitioner trainees. In various other fields of study, including counseling and liberal arts education, experiential activities used by instructors to complement course content have been found to greatly contribute to trainees' self-awareness, skill development, and empathy at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Free-

land, 2009; Grant, 2006; Kolb, 2015; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

### Experiential Learning

Experiential learning requires students to go beyond the classroom, allows them to gain hands-on experience, and promotes reflection on what has been learned, which impacts overall awareness (Schelbe, Petracchi & Weaver, 2014). In addictions coursework, students without personal experience with an addiction can still undergo an abstinence experience and reflect on the implications of the experiential learning for their awareness of addiction issues and treatment. Reflective writing about personal thoughts, feelings, and reactions to practical experiences fosters professional development and personal growth (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). Reflective writing offers students a less public forum for discussing difficult emotional aspects than disclosures in front of a class or small group (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). When students write about their experiences, they are often challenged to develop insights into their own beliefs and assumptions and encouraged to use critical thinking (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017).

In substance use disorder courses, students often engage in experiential learning with reflection through abstinence assignments in which they abstain from something they value, such as sugar, caffeine, or social media, for a designated period. Researchers have found that abstinence assignments increase self-awareness and empathy among master's-level counseling trainees (Caldwell, 2007; Giordano et al., 2015; Harrawood, McClure, & Nelson, 2011; Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young 2009; Spaid & Squires, 2006; Warren, Hof, McGriff, & Morris, 2012). Similar research has not been conducted with bachelor's-level trainees; however, such research is needed because most substance use practitioners are trained at the bachelor's level (NAADAC, 2012; Rieckmann, Farentinos, Tillotson, Kocarnik, & McCarty, 2011). Considering the research noted earlier indicating that some practicing substance use practitioners hold inaccurate

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assumptions about addiction and recovery, it is possible that trainees who have not experienced a substance use disorder and who have limited experiential training may enter field placements and jobs lacking empathy and holding judgments about clients with substance use issues. To prevent this, undergraduate pedagogy for addictions courses preparing substance use practitioners may be enhanced through the inclusion of experiential activities found to be beneficial at the master's level. Ultimately, the goal would be to have earlier experiential learning experiences contribute to more effective field placement experiences and careers as substance use professionals.

The current study aimed to assess whether an experiential abstinence project used commonly in master's-level substance use disorder courses would produce similar positive results for undergraduate substance use practitioner trainees with no history of substance use. The experiential abstinence assignment was designed to enhance trainees' personal awareness of addiction and recovery as well as their empathy toward those in treatment for substance use disorders. The trainees in the present study engaged in reflective writing about the abstinence project, and their writing was qualitatively analyzed for emergent themes to assess the students' subjective experiences with the experiential learning activity. The current study begins to fill the gap in research exploring substance use experiential training at the undergraduate level. The study was guided by the following research question: "How do undergraduate substance use practitioner trainees learn about addictions through an experiential abstinence activity?" More specifically, trainees were asked to reflect on the following questions: "To what extent did this abstinence project assist in deeper learning of course material in relation to addictions?" and "How did the project assist in personal growth and development as substance use professionals?"

### Method

Using qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), researchers examined participants'

written reflections to explore how they made sense of an experiential abstinence learning activity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Given the limited research on reflective experiential learning in undergraduate addictions coursework, a qualitative approach was appropriate to explore the emerging phenomenon (Hunt, 2011). A phenomenological approach was best suited for this study because it offers "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experience about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Because interpretive phenomenological analyses may be used to examine the meaning-making experiences of 10 participants on average (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999), it was particularly relevant for this study, which included 12 participants. Furthermore, IPA is documented as being an appropriate approach for ambiguous and emotional topics (Smith & Osborn, 2015), such as those related to addictions and abstinence.

### *Participants*

Using purposive sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012), researchers sought out undergraduate students pursuing addictions coursework with an experiential learning component. Students in two sections of an undergraduate human services addictions theory and interventions course at a large Southeastern university were invited to participate in the study. One section had 16 students enrolled, and the other had 15. One of the sections was co-taught by the third author. She was not in direct contact with the students; rather, she graded assignments, answered student emails, and assisted in the development of class plans. Her co-instructor conducted all face-to-face interactions with the students. An instructor who was not involved in the study taught the other section of the course. The abstinence assignment and written reflections about the experience were class requirements for all students. However, participation in the study was optional. Ultimately, 12 of the 31 students consented to participate in the study.

The 12 participants were seeking baccalaureate degrees in human services. Eight were female, and



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four were male. The age range of the participants was 20 to 60 years old, with an average age of 32. Nine of the participants were White/European, and three were African American. None had previous histories of substance use.

### *Data Source*

Written reflections of students' experiences with the abstinence assignment served as the data source for the present study. All students in the class were asked to record their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to a 30-day project in which they abstained from something in their lives they would have difficulty giving up.

### *Procedure*

The university's institutional review board provided exempt status for the study. Efforts were taken to ensure that students were not coerced to participate. Specifically, students were informed that the author acting as an instructor in the course would not know which students chose to participate. Those who did participate were provided informed consent forms and assured that confidentiality would be maintained. Pseudonyms were used when quoting participants in this article. All written reflections, data, and analyses were maintained on a password-secured computer.

### *Data Analysis*

Researchers followed Smith et al.'s (1999) procedures to analyze the data. To enhance credibility through researcher triangulation (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999), multiple authors analyzed data. Each author independently read and reread the written reflections to immerse themselves in the participants' perspectives and took notes in the margins to document emerging themes. After coding for initial themes and patterns, the authors found connections between cases and themes (Smith et al., 1999). Researchers made interpretive cross-case analyses to identify common themes across all participants. While identifying these themes and patterns, the researchers specifically looked for convergence and divergence across participants (Smith et al., 1999). After each researcher

identified individual-case and cross-case themes independently, they came together to complete consensus coding and develop a codebook. The authors supported themes using verbatim quotes to mitigate researcher bias. Through this ongoing inductive process, four superordinate themes emerged.

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness was addressed via the use of an external auditor and member checking (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). A qualitative research specialist served as an external auditor by reviewing author bracketing, participant journal entries, and authors' data analyses. The auditor recognized the authors' biases, including the instructor status of one of the authors and the recovery status of one of the authors. The auditor confirmed the emergent themes found by the authors. Likewise, the participants were given the opportunity to check the final codebook to assess the accuracy of the findings. No participants suggested any changes to the themes.

## **Results**

Four cross-case themes emerged from the data analysis of the 12 substance use practitioner trainees' perceptions of their abstinence project. These included the following: 1) skepticism about the project's intent, with the subthemes of "questioning efficacy of project" and "questioning ability to relate to addict"; 2) preoccupation, with a subtheme of "emotional responses"; 3) impact of others on abstinence; and 4) relevance of the abstinence project.

### *Theme 1: Skepticism*

The first theme of experiencing skepticism, which was shared by 67% of the participants ( $n = 8$ ), can be interpreted in two ways. The first subtheme appeared to address initial skepticism about the project's ability to effectively replicate the difficulty of abstinence. It appears the participants did not understand how the requirement to abstain from something seemingly so harmless could help them relate to some-

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one with a serious addiction. Christopher inferred this in the following statement: “Initially, I thought this assignment was not going to be fulfilling or very productive. Honestly, I had my doubts about the whole idea.” Josh also expressed his skepticism: “When I first started my 30 days of abstinence from coffee I thought it was going to be a walk in the park...” Kate indicated, “At the beginning of this project I was certainly in denial. As time went on throughout this project, I learned that this one thing had so much control over my mind.”

The second subtheme addressed participants’ skepticism about relating their ability to abstain from something to an addict’s ability to abstain from a substance. It appeared that prior to engaging in the project, trainees believed themselves to be stronger and thus better equipped to abstain. Reflecting on the first day of the assignment compared to the end, Rachel said,

[I initially thought] giving up soda is not very hard. I mean personally I do wish I could have it right now but saying no to myself is not hard. ...What is not a problem for one person can become a big problem for another person.

Participants’ realizations about the challenges of abstinence contributed to their ability to understand how great that challenge can be for a person in recovery.

### *Theme 2: Preoccupation*

The second theme of preoccupation was apparent in 83% of the participants’ (n = 10) reflections, and they expressed an overwhelming focus on the object of their abstinence. Related to this theme, Christopher said, “Funny when you can’t have something you want, how you think about it more than usual. ...By the end it was occupying my thought process a bit too much.” The trainees began to experience preoccupation and cravings, overlapping the experience of a person with a substance use disorder. Furthermore, Tim reflected, “As each day went by, my urge to relapse seemed to drastically increase and my senses were hypersensitive as if I was a vampire out for blood.”

The subtheme of emotional responses emerged under the theme of preoccupation. Several students experienced shifts in their emotions during the abstinence project. On different occasions throughout the project, the trainees expressed their frustration with being so preoccupied with their substances and altering their lives to remain abstinent. Once again, the trainees were provided an opportunity to empathize with the experience of a person with a substance use disorder and gain a heightened awareness of their struggles. Rachel highlighted her frustration with abstinence:

Saturday usually means going out and having some fun with friends. I watched all my friends get ready and go out. I stayed home; making myself aware of what it would be like if I had to change my lifestyle because of an addiction. I felt very left out.

Sarah shared a variety of emotions and fascination with the experience: “Another thing that I noticed was how agitated, short tempered, and annoyed I would become with the people around me. Little things that don’t usually bother me, like someone tapping a desk, would drive me crazy.” Kevin shared, “During this process, my emotions kind of ranged from happiness to annoyance.” As the participants recognized the range of emotions they experienced during the assignment, they realized how emotions can impact recovery.

### *Theme 3: Impact of Others on Abstinence*

The third theme was the impact of others on abstinence. Of the trainees, 67% (n = 8) experienced an epiphany that others in their lives influence their experiences in both positive and negative ways. Similar to people with substance use disorders, they gained an awareness of how difficult it can be to be in the company of those still using. Shayla illuminated this theme: “Luckily my husband was there so he could help feed the ice cream to my daughter, because I just did not feel strong enough to have a spoonful of ice cream actually in my hand and not eat it.” Likewise, Tim experienced this phenomenon:

The more difficult moments of this experience gave



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me a better understanding of the emphasis put on “people, places, and things.” I tried getting my close circle of friends and family on board with the abstinence so they would not tempt me. I even told my grandma, although she tempted me the most! She would say, “No one would know [if you relapse], I won’t tell.” How do you say no to grandma?

Finally, Beth also reflected on this theme:

I remember hearing about the people, places, and things. ... I realized the importance of that throughout this project. There are definitely people you know that will influence you to slip up and, in my case, “just have a small bite of cake.”

### *Theme 4: Relevance of Project*

The final theme, relevance of the project, is deemed the most important for this study. This theme, which was addressed by 100% of the participants ( $n = 12$ ), particularly emphasized the development of empathy toward those with substance use disorders as a result of participating in the assignment. The trainees’ reactions captured their learning through this abstinence activity and the value of experiential learning for undergraduate substance use practitioner trainees. Beth reflected, “I think that this activity has made me realize just how difficult addiction can be for anyone. The barriers are everywhere; enablers, peers, people, places, and things are right in front of you.”

Christopher shared,

It really does serve to give you a glimpse of what someone who is addicted to substances may experience. I may have never known or even cared what it is like for a substance user to face resisting what his or her body craves. Even though this is on a smaller scale it has been enlightening. It has also given me a greater sense of appreciation and compassion for those who are courageous enough to...abstain from substance use.

Cynthia said,

The thought of never being able to eat [a doughnut] for the rest of my life is scary. I can’t live the rest of my life without Krispy Kreme. This project is making me look at it from an addict’s point of

view; boy do I have the wrong attitude. If I can’t give up a doughnut, how can an alcoholic never drink again?

Rachel reflected,

I have a newfound respect for how hard it is to give something up. The mindset of an addict is very difficult and I sympathize with anyone who is struggling to become sober. I believe this was a great way about learning about addictions. Doing an abstinence project really opened my eyes to what it is like to have an addiction. This may be the best way of understanding and having the right mindset while studying addictions.

Kate said,

This project has taught me to see behind the eyes of an addict and the daily struggle that they go through. This project was just a little glimpse of what it is really like to be an addict... It is so much more than just “getting rid” of the controlling substance.

## Discussion

This study began to explore undergraduate substance use practitioner trainees’ perceptions of an experiential learning activity commonly used at the master’s level. The findings indicated that the abstinence experience followed by reflection resulted in deeper learning, empathy, and development. These results are aligned with the enhanced empathy and awareness resulting from similar activities conducted at the master’s level (Caldwell, 2007; Giordano et al., 2015; Harrawood et al., 2011; Ieva et al., 2009; Spaid & Squires, 2006; Warren et al., 2012). The meaning-making illuminated in the reflective writing assignments further illustrates conclusions that experiential learning can enhance students’ learning beyond the classroom (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Schelbe et al., 2014). The participants noted that without doing this project, in which they had to actively abstain from something they valued for an extended period outside class, they may not have developed as deep of an understanding of what people with substance use disorders face.

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Bachelor's-level addiction professionals are a significant, growing contribution to the helping fields (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; NAA-DAC, 2012; Rieckmann et al., 2011). The training they receive can ensure that they possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills to adequately meet the needs of clients in recovery from addiction. Most of the participants' initial skepticism about the assignment as well as their assumptions that they had more willpower than an addict and the shifts in those perceptions after engaging in the activity speak to the need for experiential activities such as this to promote professional competence in undergraduate human services education. Yates, DeLeon, and Rapp (2017) found equivalent results by qualitatively analyzing "good-bye letters" to participants' substances of choice, journal entries, and reflection summaries by 17 counselor trainees who engaged in their abstinence project. Based on the results of the current study, similar studies conducted at the master's level, and earlier research on the benefits of experiential learning (Schelbe et al., 2014; Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017), undergraduate programs may need to consider modifying their pedagogical approaches to addiction training so opportunities for lived experiences followed by reflection are integrated throughout the curricula to promote professional development.

### Limitations

While the results of the present study may begin to shape our understanding of how experiential learning can contribute to substance use practitioners' professional development, several limitations existed. First, analysis of written data as opposed to transcribed interviews limited the interaction researchers could have with participants, eliminating the possibility of probing or clarifying questions. Furthermore, without data triangulation, there were no other sources to confirm or substantiate emergent themes. Moreover, participants came from a single university, limiting the transferability of the findings.

### Implications and Future Directions

Previous research (Caldwell, 2007; Giordano et al., 2015; Harrawood et al., 2011; Ieva et al., 2009; Spaid & Squires, 2006; Warren et al., 2012; Yates et al., 2017) showed the importance of experiential learning activities for graduate-level trainees to develop personally and professionally. The outcomes of the present study show how experiential learning activities can contribute to personal growth, development, and academic understanding for undergraduate substance disorder trainees. In a field that requires bachelor's-level professionals to work intimately with clients in need, increased awareness, competency, and empathy are vital (CSHSE, 2013; Neukrug, 2017; National Organization for Human Services, 2018). Addiction professionals who themselves are in recovery can be an invaluable resource to the field because they bring insight from personal experiences, which has been found to increase empathy (Doukas, 2015; Stoffelmayr et al., 1998; Whitter, 2006). Shaping undergraduate addictions education curricula based on research indicating that similar levels of empathy and compassion can result from experiential abstinence projects may further assist trainees who are not in recovery themselves in becoming competent, aware substance abuse professionals.

Future research is needed to assess whether the abstinence assignment translates to effective human services practices. Performing qualitative research using interviews and focus groups and implementing interview protocols that target participants' perceptions of their skill development will enhance the depth of research on this topic. Future research should also add breadth to the topic and seek input from participants attending different programs and universities. Quantitative research may add to the generalizability of results, and an experimental design in particular could help us analyze the impact of an experiential learning assignment on skill development.

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