

## Review

# Bridging the gap between theory and practice with film: How to use *fight club* to teach existential counseling theory and techniques

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### Abstract

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Because of the philosophical concepts inherent in the theory, existential counseling is sometimes challenging to teach, counselor educators can use film to help students understand, synthesize, and apply existential concepts. Constructivist teaching methods and experiential exercises give to students a structure that helps them understand existential concepts within the context of their own world views and how those concepts could operate in a therapeutic practice. By providing a detailed explanation of *Fight Club*, educators help students understand the philosophical groundwork of this theory in a concrete way. Specific activities are then used to help students apply the concepts with clients.

**Keywords:** Existential, Philosophy, Media, Theory, Counseling

## INTRODUCTION

Counseling theory is a fundamental course in counselor education that requires students to accomplish several things. First, they must learn the essential assumptions and concepts within each theory. Next, students must assess their personal beliefs about life and how they understand change. In this way, they can determine which theory they might apply in their work with clients. Counselors who are new to the field are urged to work from one particular theoretical orientation so that they can ground their clinical work in a structure that help them understand client issues and goals in counseling so that they can provide specific interventions. Learning existential counseling theory can be challenging for students as well as educators because theory needs to be joined with practice, and this requires one to use abstract philosophical concepts in a meaningful and concrete way. This process also requires that students reflect on the theoretical information they are learning in a personal meaning-making process. In order to assist students in accomplishing this multilayered task, instructors benefit from a constructivist teaching structure and dynamic techniques. In this article, we offer a specific and

constructivist-informed lesson plan by using a film to help connect theory and practice for use in a counseling theory course. The film *Fight Club* is used to illuminate existential concepts, help students evaluate their own belief systems, and practice applying an existential orientation in a therapeutic process. The use of films in counseling theory offers an advantageous element of experience in the classroom (Collin, 2006; Koch and Dollarhide, 2000; Villalba and Redmond, 2008) so that students have a tangible way of grasping theoretical orientation when learning counseling skills. Using a film within a constructivist framework is a concrete way to assist instructors in helping students to actively examine theory from the perspective of their own life experience and belief systems.

### Constructivist education

The concept of constructivist teaching is that knowledge is created by both teachers and students and that those students construct knowledge from their personal

experiences (Loyens, Rikers, and Schmidt, 2009). In the classroom, students bring the ways they understand the world, and these various ways are influenced by the cultures, languages, and experiences their lives. The challenge of the constructivist teacher is to find out how to help students learn through a creative process so that students can access information through discourse and by scrutinizing their personal epistemologies. Ideally, students should “actively constructing their own knowledge rather than passively receiving information transmitted to them from teachers and textbooks” (Weimer, 2002, p. 11). This is where the concept of scaffolding is important. In scaffolding, teachers methodically deliver information in the classroom so that students can generate consolidate what they are learning internally. Within this structure, teachers help students with cognitive development in an effort to help them become proficient in using inductive reasoning and answering higher order questions (McAuliffe and Lovell, 1997; Montgomery, Marbley, and Kurtines, 2000). To accomplish this, teachers use Socratic questioning as well as discussions in the classroom. Hierarchical relating is discouraged so that students can become more autonomous.

Challenging students to be active participants in their own learning requires creativity and interventions that invite student participation. Socratic questioning is a useful tool as it engages students in examining their reasoning without being embarrassed in front of their peers when they seek to integrate new ideas (Overholser, 1993). Students are encouraged to think independently and to apply new information to situations so questions are created motivate students to find the answers on their own. Through dialogue and discussion, a teacher helps students develop critical thinking skills by requiring them to establish bases for their belief systems and to support those beliefs with facts (Dewey, 2005). The teacher’s customary position of authority is omitted in constructivist teaching so that students are responsible for becoming active contributors in their personal learning.

All cultures have individuals who understand and engage with others differently (Bruner, 1990), and this can also be said about students’ personal cultures. Each student is influenced by personal experiences, beliefs, and emotions so one may see how important it is for teachers to expect their students to construct personal meanings instead pushing their personal beliefs into the understanding of existential theory. A very effective way to do this is to moderate a group discussion with students so that they can examine the source for their belief systems in a safe environment.

Constructivist teaching is a very effective way to help students actively discover various counseling interventions and theoretical frameworks so that they can designate a basis for their clinical work. In this way, they choose how to understand theory in terms of personal

beliefs about life and the nature of change. By creating this personal connection with theory, students create a way of looking at clinical work that is instinctive to their ways of helping.

Using constructivist teaching practices can also help to model the therapeutic process in counselor education since constructivism and humanism overlap considerably (Motschnig-Pitrik and Lucie Rohlíková, 2013). Helping clients to examine their own belief systems and values while empowering them to find ways to transform is similar to helping students incorporate new ideas and skills. Facilitating learning occurs in both the classroom and the therapy office, and constructivist methods, which help to build meaning making and critical thinking skills, are particularly relevant in counselor education those same reasons.

### Existential Theory

While many counseling theories are taught in graduate programs, the existential orientation might be one of the most challenging. This has a large part to do with the philosophical groundwork that is essential to this theory. For students who are new to existential philosophy, learning these concepts can be quite difficult while teachers may have a hard time presenting existentialism in a concrete way. In truth, readers might be comforted in the fact that existential philosophy is quite congruent with constructivist theory and can be effectively taught in that manner. To begin, existential counseling is based in the awareness that experience is quite subjective and so the counselor should allow for unique insights when working with clients (Harris, 2001). Just as students in the classroom must create personal knowledge so too are clients asked to discuss personal experiences and become more personally responsible. Also, both constructivism and existentialism depend on cognitive development, perception of reality, and the effects on humanity.

Existentialism is a personal theory and because of that, it is equally diverse. “The goal of [existential] counseling is to help clients make-meaning of their lives” and so teachers can help students learn how “to make their own meaning[s]” in relation to existential theory (Edger and Meyer, 2010, p. 17). This is why we have not provided an established method for existential counseling. Rather, we chose to focus on existential themes, with some potential interventions offered to students for experiential practice.

### The film

Using movies is a very useful way to help students grasp existential philosophy within a modern life environment. The movie *Fight Club* (Linson, Chaffin, Bell, and Fincher,

1999) is adapted from a novel written by Chuck Palahniuk, and it is really an idyllic tool to help students understand existential theory. Because the film is both entertaining and thought provoking, it is a very effective vehicle for creating dynamic discussions among students in the classroom. Using a movie also provides a framework for helping students to (1) understand how clients could present with problems that could be framed existentially and (2) apply existential themes and interventions to a therapeutic process.

The movie stars Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helen Bonham Carter, and it offers a look at contemporary society and its position within a consumer-fueled culture. Through its main characters, a struggle erupts between instinctual force and revolutionary illusions about freedom. Edward Norton plays the unnamed main character who is tired of his work-focused, materialistic, and soulless existence. He meets Tyler Durden, an alter-ego who encapsulates everything that he is not and wants to be. Tyler challenges his views about reality and who he is as a human being. Many existential themes are illustrated in the film in such a visceral way, making this movie an ideal teaching tool for college educators seeking lively discussions in their college classrooms.

*Fight Club* is about a man's passage from estrangement to authenticity with a number of nuances relative to gender and personal identity. Edward Norton, who we will call 'E' from here on out, manifests his distress over his materialistic, emotionally empty life through chronic insomnia. A visit with his physician leads to a referral to visit cancer support groups to expand his perspective. He attends various support groups for people with different illnesses and is comforted by the rawness of intense feelings exhibited by the attendees. He finds himself fascinated by the relational intensity expressed by participants, many of whom are facing impending death. E makes Marla's acquaintance, who also attends meetings for diseases she does not have. Marla tells E that people "really listen to you" whenever they assume that you are dying. When E meets Tyler Durden on an airplane, existential themes of meaning and death begin in the film. Tyler challenges E's conventionality, and is immediately authentic, honest, and direct in his communication. Later, E's condominium is demolished by a fire, and he calls Tyler. In a matter of hours, he meets Tyler and moves into his rundown house just outside of the city.

After being urged by Tyler, E participates in his first exchange of physical blows and then draws further into the exploration of other primal ways of relating. E feels alive for the first time when he feels the adrenaline and the pain during the fight. In this primal state, he moves away from his feelings of alienation into a feeling of truly being alive. What he thought was important fades away, and he and Tyler create a *Fight Club* for men challenging each other to a tussle in the ring. In this moment, E has a sense of belonging and meaning. Dialogues begin about

emptiness and modern society, absent fathers, God's indifference, and confronting death. These conversations lead E and Tyler to engage in a succession of escapades intended to destabilize modern society, later turning into a mission branded "Project Mayhem."

Marla is the final piece of the character trio, phoning E to tell him that she overdosed on her anxiety medication. E identifies with Marla and respects her in a strange way because he can see her flaws and her struggle towards authenticity. In his relationships with others, E strives to be free and to reconnect with his sense of humanity. Eventually, E wants to stop "Project Mayhem," which puts him at odds with his former mentor and hero, Tyler Durden. The movie's plot takes a turn when the audience discovers that Tyler and E are actually the same person, leading E to try to integrate his disjointed identity.

### Teaching method

Educators should start the teaching segment with a general introduction to existential philosophy and the themes of: authenticity, death and non-being, aloneness and relatedness, existential angst, personal responsibility, and meaning making. Populations who may benefit from existential counseling and current orientations, such as Gestalt therapy, that offer an example of contemporary practice, should be reviewed. If possible, an educator can provide a brief overview of philosophers like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. This kind of review should enable students to understand existentialism in a historical context as well as introduce them to different philosophical ground works.

Educators can then introduce *Fight Club* and discuss the structure of how the students will process the film. For processing, educators can ask students to move into groups of three to five. Each group should be assigned one existential theme or concept that was introduced in a former lecture/discussion on existentialism. Each group is asked to look for an example of their assigned theme when they watch the movie and illustrate how that theme is exhibited in the film. Breaks of 15 minutes are recommended throughout the movie viewing so that the class can discuss the themes that have come up so far as well as how the students have personally experienced these concepts. After the viewing of the movie, educators should ask each group about their findings. Because many courses have different schedules, educators may need to break up the viewing of the film and discussions into a few course sessions.

After the class has viewed the entire movie, educators should give them some time to discuss their findings in their groups. After this, students can discuss findings in the class at large while the instructor writes them on the board. During this time, the discussion about themes can become more detail-oriented while the instructor can help

students look at information they might have missed. Questions that can be asked to further the personal meaning-making process are:

How do your values about work and conforming to societal norms differ from the characters' values?

How much freedom do you believe we really have to do what we want in the world? How important is gender in forming your identity?

These questions can be incorporated into written assignments as well as a class discussion, and students could be encouraged to create their own questions for other groups if time allows.

### Application of Concepts and Themes

The next vital part of the movie discussion is how to talk about how existential themes are demonstrated in life and how existential issues can be identified in clients. This requires reviewing existential themes in terms of behavior and experience. Educators could ask students to generate a list of symptoms for E (e.g., isolation, alienation, emotional numbness, meaninglessness, hopelessness, loneliness), and this could be followed by a discussion of potential diagnoses. Having students brainstorm possible ways E's behavior demonstrates his need to fill personal needs can also help students to see E's attempts at emotional connection, understanding what it means to be a man, and trying to find one's place in society. From here, the scene where E visits the doctor could be replayed. The instructor can play the role of E from this point forward and allow students the chance to practice engaging the client in a therapeutic dialog building on his comment in the film, "I am in pain."

### Existential Therapy Task Exercise

Students are divided into groups of four. One student plays E as the client. One student is the counselor, and two students are observers. Observers are given clear instructions to provide behavioral feedback to the counselor on how they completed specific therapeutic tasks. The counselor, as a result of the group level examination of themes and symptoms, can begin a role play exercise that allows him or her to practice existential counseling skills. Students should be informed that these skills would be appropriate for after a therapeutic alliance had been formed with the client and basic personal issues had been identified. The following therapeutic tasks are included in the instructions:

1. Honor the client's experience while being fully present and with the client.
  - a. Use body language, eye contact, tone of voice, as well as validation, empathy, and positive regard

2. Using empathic dialog, Socratic questioning, and reflecting listening, help the client to develop his understanding of his own suffering and his responsibility for the suffering.
  - a. Use questions such as: *How did you come to feel so badly? What part have you played in the creation of the situation you are in? Do you remember a time when you felt more alive?*
3. Develop the client's understanding of his own values, beliefs, and desires and how they are supported by, or are at odds with, contemporary society.
  - a. Use questions such as: *If you knew you would be dead in one year, what would you want to experience beforehand? How would your life be different?*
  - b. *What is most important to you? What gives your life meaning? What beliefs were you raised with that feel relevant for you still?*
4. Help the client brainstorm ways to live with more agency, empowering the client to explore the consequences of different options.
  - a. Use questions such as: *If you knew you could not fail, what changes would you make in your life? What are some ways you could be a little more like Tyler in your daily life? What are Tyler's drawbacks? What would it look like if you could only take the best of Tyler?*

The observers should be encouraged to reflect back to the counselor specific comments that the counselor made, questions he or she asked, and body language that gave evidence of the above tasks. With this technique, the observers help to track for the counselor what interventions yielded fruitful dialog, what interventions were not as helpful in engaging the client, and how the counselor was relating with the client, for instance, what was awkward or seemed inauthentic.

### CONCLUSION

In the movie *Fight Club* we are introduced to one man's quest from meaninglessness to authenticity. This diverse look at E's psyche delivers a vivid representation of varying existential themes. Viewing this film as a modern tale of an individual being faced with essential existential concerns enables educators to teach the concept of existential counseling within a captivating and entertaining format. Learning existential themes is a personal endeavor requiring an individual meaning-making process. Existential concepts differ among varying philosophers so educators must be sensitive to the notion that students must learn how to grasp existential themes through personal experiences and ideas. As instructors help students comprehend existential themes in concrete ways through film, it is also imperative to note that they are co-learners in this endeavor.

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