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# Enhancing Counselor Education and Supervision Through Deliberate Practice

Zach Budesa, Casey A. Barrio Minton

**Abstract:** Professional and student counselors must develop and maintain their counseling skills in order to engage in ethical and effective counseling. Recent research suggests that graduate education and supervision has little effect on client outcomes. Investigations of expertise development have given rise to deliberate practice, a framework which structures skill development research and instruction. Deliberate practice involves individualized coaching, repetition, and solo practice in development of optimal performance. This conceptual article introduces deliberate practice as a framework for enhancing effectiveness of counselor education and supervision practices. Applications of deliberate practice to teaching and supervision and suggestions for future research are provided.

**What is the public significance of this article?** Counseling pedagogy uses a variety of methods in classrooms and supervision to help novice counselors develop key skills for their work. Deliberate Practice may be an effective method to help counselors develop more effective skills for working with their clients. Deliberate Practice provides a unified framework to help integrate common methods across teaching and supervision, and emphasizes the use of repetitive practice and individualized feedback.

*Keywords:* deliberate practice, skill development, counselor education

Counselors' interpersonal skills are essential for helping clients achieve positive outcomes in counseling (Anderson et al., 2009; Wampold & Imel, 2015). The importance of interpersonal skills is supported by the codification of relational skills in educational and ethical standards within counselor education. Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) Standards require programs to attend to methods for developing and maintaining relationships (2.F.5.d), counselor characteristics that influence counseling (2.F.5.f), essential interviewing and counseling skills (2.F.5.g), and evidence-based counseling strategies (2.F.5.j). Following graduation, counselors have an ethical duty to maintain skills that facilitate client outcomes (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014).

Researchers and educators have developed models to help student counselors learn effective interpersonal skills. Skills training methods over the

past five decades include Ivey's (1971) microskills, which focused on enactment of specific behaviors; the Triad Training Model (Pedersen, 1977), which focused on developing self-other awareness and perspective taking; and the Reflecting Team Model (Landis & Young, 1994), in which student counselors provided immediate feedback to each other. Paladino et al. (2011) proposed the Interactive Training Model to improve realism of role-plays and integrate strengths of previous models. Although each of these methods have their supporters, the mental health professions have limited empirical evidence about which methods facilitate development of effective clinical skills.

The evidence regarding the impact of graduate education on helping professionals' interpersonal skill and their clients' outcomes remains mixed. In two studies, clinical psychology graduate students' client outcomes were compared to PhD-level psychologists using the Behavioral Health Measure

(Budge et al., 2013) or the Outcome Questionnaire–45 (Erekson et al., 2017). Budge et al. (2013) found that across 1,318 clients, there was no difference in clients' posttherapy outcomes across the 20 predoctoral interns, the 34 practicum students, or the 12 licensed psychologists. Erekson et al.'s (2017) analysis of 4,047 clients seen by 22 therapists showed that there was no difference in the degree of improvement or rate of improvement clients experienced based on their therapist's level of training (graduate students, interns, postdoctoral trainees, or licensed professions) or experience (measured in years).

The effectiveness of clinical supervision has also been called into question in recent years. Watkins (2011) reviewed studies investigating the effect of supervision on client outcomes published between 1981 and 2011. This review revealed literature riddled with data and methodological problems alongside few studies that demonstrated the effect of supervisor or supervision on client outcomes. Watkins concluded that the empirical evidence did not answer the question regarding whether supervision impacted client outcomes. Likewise, Rousmaniere et al. (2016) studied the effect of supervision on outcomes for over 6,500 clients seen by 175 therapists working with 23 supervisors. Supervisors accounted for less than one-half a percent of the variance in client outcomes as measured by the Outcome Questionnaire–45.2.

In recent years, some researchers in clinical and counseling psychology have explored deliberate practice as a way to improve practitioner effectiveness. Research on deliberate practice, based on the science of expertise development (Ericsson, 2019), spans a variety of fields. Deliberate practice evidence shows that much of what is considered expert performance is based on effort and practice, not on innate talent or biological factors (Ericsson et al., 1993). Deliberate practice offers an evidenced-based teaching and learning method from which counselor educators and supervisors can frame skill development. Deliberate practice offers a developmentally sensitive, supervision-based, iterative process (Ericsson, 2019) that can aid skill development for graduate-level counseling and psychotherapy students (Hill et

al., 2019; Lipp, 2019). To aid counselor educators in including deliberate practice in their work, this article includes explorations of deliberate practice and its application to counselor education and supervision.

### **Deliberate Practice**

Deliberate practice is a framework for engaging in focused, intense practice with the goal of continuous improvement and optimal performance (Ericsson et al., 1993). Deliberate practice was first researched in music where Ericsson et al. (1993) sought to understand what differentiated top performers from more average performers. Deliberate practice research now spans many fields, including athletic coaching (Coughlan et al., 2014; Ericsson, 2019), medical education (Barrett-Naylor et al., 2020; Ericsson, 2008), and competitive games like SCRABBLE and chess (Ericsson et al., 1993; Tuffiash et al., 2007). More recently, deliberate practice has been applied to counseling and psychotherapy (Chow et al., 2015; Goldberg, Rousmaniere et al., 2016). Because deliberate practice crosses academic and professional fields, some foundation literature refers to coaches, performers, and trainees and considers topics like expert, superior, or elite performance. These are related to counselors, counselor educators, supervisors, supervisees, students, and teachers within a counselor education paradigm where the focus is on highly effective counseling skills. For clarity, we will use “teachers” and “students” unless discussing clinical supervision.

Deliberate practice has three major tasks: individualized design of effective practice, active responses to a task, and individualized assessment (Ericsson, 2019). In the first task, teachers and students develop practice tasks by identifying the most important area for improvement. Teachers provide clear and direct guidance about more effective ways to perform (Ericsson, 2019). Active responses to a task necessitate that teachers and students set an unambiguous goal, students engage in repetitive solo practice, and teachers provide students with immediate formative feedback (Ericsson et al., 1993). In the final task, teachers assess performance and decide when students

should transition to the next task, which is set just beyond their current abilities (Ericsson, 2019). To balance the challenge of training, teachers organize tasks in increasing difficulty. Teachers' role in deliberate practice is to support students' practice, but this role cannot overshadow the importance of students' individual efforts.

### **Deliberate Practice for Counselors**

Many components of deliberate practice will be familiar to counselor educators and are found throughout the teaching and supervision literature. Chow et al. (2015) found that the most effective practice activities were reviewing difficult cases alone, attending workshops focused on specific approaches to counseling, and reflecting on past and future sessions. Counselor educators will also recognize the importance of articulating learning outcomes clearly and providing regular feedback throughout the developmental process (Best Practices in Clinical Supervision Task Force, 2011; CACREP, 2016; Wood et al., 2016). The professional identity literature highlights clearly the role of more experienced mentors in counselors' developmental process (Gibson et al., 2010), and CACREP (2016) standards require appropriate educator experience and preparation. Deliberate practice does not replace previous approaches or require significant modification to fit into counselor education; instead, it provides a framework that counselor educators can use to direct the tools already available within the field more effectively.

A departure from traditional counselor education approaches is the use of solo practice. Solo practice is key to the deliberate practice view of skill development, and researchers have been adamant that practice must be separate from performance (Chow et al., 2015; Ericsson, 2019; Ericsson et al., 1993). In practice ranging from SCRABBLE to psychotherapy, superior performers differentiated themselves from average performers through solo practice, with elite performers practicing around twice as much as more average performers (Chow et al., 2015; Tuffiash et al., 2007). Solo practice can include reviewing recordings of performance (Chow et al., 2015; Tuffiash et al., 207) and repeating and refining affective and verbal

responses (Barrett-Naylor et al., 2020). For counselors, this means spending additional time alone reviewing difficult cases and video recordings of work with clients, practicing alternate responses, and working to become more comfortable with strong emotions that clients may express. Although these types of practice can occur within counselor education and the counseling profession, they are not the primary method of practice for professional clinicians (Chow et al., 2015).

### **Deliberate Practice for Clinical Effectiveness**

Although still in its early days and somewhat piecemeal in approach, an emerging body of research illustrates how deliberate practice holds promise for enhancing counselor skills and, in turn, impacting client outcomes. In a survey of the practice behaviors of 69 therapists matched with client outcomes on the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation-Outcome Measure from 4,580 clients, Chow et al. (2015) showed that clients experienced the greatest reduction in symptoms and increase in well-being when working with clinicians who spent more than double the amount of hours in solo practice than clinicians with average client outcomes. Clinicians most often engaged in solo practice of reviewing difficult cases and reflecting on past and future sessions. In another study, providing a supportive environment in which clinicians engaged in deliberate practice resulted in a greater reduction in client symptoms over time (Goldberg, Babins-Wagner, et al., 2016). This study investigated the Outcome Questionnaire-45 scores of 5,128 clients working with 153 therapists and showed that institutional efforts to increase deliberate practice resulted in improved client outcomes that could not be accounted for by therapists' years of experience or patients' symptom severity.

Deliberate practice can benefit graduate students by helping improve their self-efficacy and interpersonal or clinical skills. For undergraduate psychology students, observing effective methods of responding to clients and having the opportunity for repetitive role-plays with feedback resulted in improvement in interpersonal skills during the Facilitative Interpersonal Skills task as assessed by

experienced raters (Anderson et al., 2019). Deliberate practice interventions have helped graduate students in psychology develop greater self-efficacy for immediacy skills (Hill et al., 2019) and become more accepting of their own mistakes (Rosén, 2020). Meanwhile, graduate counseling students improved their case conceptualization skills (Lipp, 2019). Finally, psychology graduate students and psychiatric nurses demonstrated improved interpersonal skills and interventions following engagement in workshops emphasizing repetitive practice and immediate feedback (Barrett-Naylor et al., 2020; Westra et al., 2020).

As deliberate practice has become more popular, educators and supervisors have developed deliberate practice-based methods for supervision and practice. Combining deliberate practice and feedback-informed treatment (Prescott et al., 2017), the Expertise-Development Model (EDM; Rousmaniere et al., 2017) is a supervision and consultation model that incorporates client feedback into goal setting and skill development. Other recent deliberate practice applications included a self-help guide for clinicians wanting to integrate deliberate practice into their work (Rousmaniere, 2016) and a guide to intrapersonal skill development (Rousmaniere, 2019). More recent work includes a guide on the science and application of deliberate practice for clinicians (S. D. Miller et al., 2020), an organization that certifies clinical deliberate practice trainers (Rousmaniere & Vaz, n.d.) and includes new self-directed training for multicultural skills, and a web-based platform for the practice of counseling skills (Theravue, n.d.). These efforts are gaining steam in psychology while raising questions about how deliberate practice may help professional counselors (Clements-Hickman & Reese, 2020).

### **Integrating Deliberate Practice Into Counselor Education and Supervision**

Deliberate practice is a flexible framework that counselor educators can use individually, in triads, or in larger groups with counselors at all stages of development. Across contexts, counselor educators' use of deliberate practice will remain the same. They will (a) assess the quality of counselors' performance; (b) aid counselors in finding more

effective ways to connect with clients; (c) structure practice activities that include an explicit goal, skill repetition, and immediate feedback; and (d) monitor practice and scaffold from simpler to more complex tasks (Ericsson, 2019). These tasks may overlap with much of counselor educators' regular work, but adopting deliberate practice may help them to better integrate these tasks alongside an understanding of the process of skill development and the importance of solo practice.

Counselor educators can return to the basic deliberate practice framework in order to develop classroom, supervision, or solo practice activities. Because this framework can be used with many individuals and situations, the activities present here and elsewhere should be seen as building blocks of practice design. Not only can the activities be adapted to individual goals, but they can also be repeated throughout counselor development.

Solo practice is integral to high-quality skill development (Chow et al., 2015; Ericsson, 2019), although it may be the least used method of practice within counselor education. Solo practice involves active engagement with repetitive practice on a specific skill. Because it is the most novel addition to counselor education, solo practice should be counselor educators' primary focus as they integrate deliberate practice. Solo practice methods can involve use of audio and video recordings, transcripts, or role-plays, and can include reviewing recordings of challenging sessions and case records, watching experienced clinicians' sessions, and practicing verbal responses (Chow et al., 2015). Solo practice could even use noncounseling media prompts to practice responding to strong emotions or difficult situations (Rousmaniere, 2019). Counselor educators and supervisors might also assign a minimum amount of solo practice time each week that are aligned with assignments and students' goals. Developing solo practice activities tailored to student counselors' developmental ability offers an opportunity to engage in solo practice that is challenging but rewarding.

Counselor educators hoping to integrate deliberate practice into their teaching and supervision may find practice diaries and recordings

useful. In studies of deliberate practice, participants used practice diaries to record their practice, work, school, leisure, and daily routine activities in 15-minute increments (Ericsson et al., 1993). Student counselors could be encouraged or required to keep a diary in which they track time, length, focus, and experiences related to solo practice (Rousmaniere, 2016). While they expect practice time to be tracked, counselor educators can use these diaries to encourage students and supervisees to increase their practice time. Not just a record of direct or indirect counseling hours, practice diaries can serve as an opportunity for students to reflect on their practice and evaluate the time they have spent in preparation for work with clients.

Recordings are a common tool for counselor educators to assess student performance and are used throughout counselor education curriculum. Because practice sessions and counseling sessions are often recorded for assignments, they can provide opportunities to identify and practice different responses. Counselor educators may instruct students to review their recordings alone or with a teacher, pause after each response, and either identify a better response or explain why the response they made was optimal. Students may also “think aloud” as they review recordings to make their cognitive process clearer. Moving beyond interventions like Interpersonal Process Recall, these moments provide teachers and students with the opportunity to identify activities and goals for solo practice, and to rehearse alternate responses until they become easier.

In order to manage time and include deliberate practice for multiple student counselors, counselor educators may vary group sizes and activity timing. Multiple models of skill instruction already include triadic, small group, and large group practice (Paladino et al., 2011), and deliberate practice can be incorporated as needed. In order to build on to existing supervision and teaching models, deliberate practice might view class or supervision meetings as brief opportunities to assess performance and provide feedback leading to solo practice activities that directly address the skills on which students or supervisees need to focus.

From introductory skills courses through field placements and supervision, the deliberate practice framework can provide effective practice for student and professional counselors. In addition to solo practice, the remainder of this section illustrates applications of deliberate practice within counselor education.

### **Interpersonal Skills Courses**

Introductory skills courses, one of the first courses new students encounter, focus on developing important interview and counseling skills and integrating them with personal characteristics (CACREP, 2016). An advanced goal in these courses is for students to develop specific relational skills and to be able to enact them in appropriate time and context. Deliberate practice can fit easily into skills courses as students focus on the essential skills counseling researchers have established as the smallest microskills. Although microskills have been subject to criticism (Ridley et al., 2011), microskills define clear goals for performance, and counselor educators can quickly assess student performance and provide feedback. Role-play and mock counseling sessions, whether in pairs, triads, or larger groups, provide an excellent opportunity for skills practice.

To improve skill selection and use, counselor educators may use role-play activities in which student counselors focus on using a specific skill. In these role-plays, one student acts as a counselor while another acts as a client. When the “counselor” stumbles on a skill, the pair can replay the moment and practice the skill until the “counselor” feels more comfortable with said skill. The teacher may coach the “counselor” on the use of a particular skill before the student returns to their practice session. Other coaching methods might include directing the “client” to repeat moments while the “counselor” uses different skills. Conducting practice in this manner will focus on one or two microskills before becoming more complex. These practice sessions can also serve as opportunities to design solo practice activities based on students’ needs.

### Other Curricular Applications

Deliberate practice can be applied to conceptual and clinical skills across the counselor education curriculum. Lipp (2019) focused on helping students develop case conceptualization skills through three 15-minute coaching sessions. These coaching sessions included (a) a review of recent homework and a discussion of personal strengths and limitations, (b) a discussion about deliberate practice and how to use it, and (c) an individualized practice exercise designed to push students into the zone of proximal development. Each session concluded with formative feedback and a homework assignment. These assignments scaled in difficulty as sessions progressed and included expectations that students focus on their internal experiences and struggles as they completed the work. Participants who received deliberate practice coaching showed improvement in case conceptualization skills when compared with a control group. Deliberate practice for conceptualization skills may be readily applied within the context of counseling theories, developmental theories, multicultural and social justice conceptualization, and diagnostic decision-making.

Additional opportunity for applying deliberate practice to more advanced counseling skills may include coaching students in assessment use, suicide assessment, broaching culture, interprofessional communication, or treatment planning. For example, the Deliberate Practice Institute (Rousmaniere & Vaz, n.d.) hosts a Multicultural Deliberate Practice training that guides counselors' practice broaching and addressing cross-cultural topics with clients. Counselor educators might assign these modules, ultimately viewing students' responses to simulated content and providing directive feedback for practice.

### Pre- and Post-Graduate Supervision and Field Experiences

Counseling field experiences and supervision provide a context where deliberate practice can be adapted with little modification. Supervision is required in counseling programs, field placements (CACREP, 2016), and postgraduate licensure

(Kaplan & Kraus, 2018). Counselor educators and supervisors already engage in frequent assessment of supervisees to identify areas for improvement or client safety issues. Each of these tasks contributes to the overall framework of deliberate practice and is necessary for the development of skilled performance (Ericsson, 2019). By further integrating deliberate practice, counselor educators and supervisors can use their assessments at times to help supervisees develop useful solo practice activities that target these areas for improvement. Then, assessment also determines when supervisees have reached a desired level of proficiency and are ready to practice more complex tasks. Students and supervisees benefit most from deliberate practice when supervisors emphasize the importance of repetitive solo practice and maintaining motivation (Ericsson, 2019).

As new counselors progress through internship and graduation, they must develop advanced skills, caseload management, and complex conceptualizations of clients. To continue challenging new counselors, supervisors can use deliberate practice focused on theory-based conceptualization and intervention skills. Theory-based interventions, such as Motivational Interviewing (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 2013), are more complex than relational skills and can be an excellent target for deliberate practice. Taking theory-based interventions as an example, counselor educators may begin by having the student counselors focus on rolling with a single statement of resistance and designing solo practice activities in which students rehearse responses that capture intent of this technique. As with other applications of deliberate practice, activities should be organized from simple (the single statement) to more complex (session-length applications of theory), to facilitate development. By providing structure and entrusting supervisees with the responsibility for practice, supervisors may aid supervisees in developing a consistent self-supervision practice.

One example of integrating deliberate practice into field experience curriculum or new counselors is through ASIST workshops (Lang et al., 2013). As described by Shannonhouse et al. (2018), ASIST is a 2-day suicide intervention training that includes

lectures, discussions, and role-plays. While taking part in an ASIST workshop, participants practice, receive feedback, and learn better ways of intervening with persons with thoughts of suicide, all of which embody the deliberate practice framework. Much like Westra et al.'s (2020) deliberate practice-based workshop, participants show an improvement in skills, knowledge, and competence following these brief interventions (Shannonhouse et al., 2018). In much the same way, student counselors who use repetitive practice and receive immediate feedback may develop stronger skills when faced with the reality of assessing clients' level of risk.

### **Limitations of Deliberate Practice**

Although performers across fields experience show improvement through deliberate practice, it has drawbacks and limitations applicable to counselor education. First and foremost, research in counseling and psychotherapy has been limited. This body of research is growing but needs further exploration by clinicians, educators, and researchers. Second, counselor education programs often operate with limited time, funding, and content-saturated curricula. In order to accommodate small course sizes in field experience, some programs offer large didactic courses for other core areas. Under these conditions, devoting time to individualized assessment of students and the development of personalized practice plans can be time consuming for counselor educators. Although supervisors may be better positioned to focus on specific skills with supervisees, supervisees may need assistance with a broad number of concerns or cases in each session, reducing time available for focused development of a singular skill. Performers report that deliberate practice activities hold limited intrinsic enjoyment (Chow et al., 2015; Ericsson et al., 1993), which requires educators and student counselors to develop and maintain motivation to continue the high level of solo practice that contributes to optimal performance. Together, these may present logistical challenges to implementing deliberate practice with fidelity.

Perhaps most importantly, the expectation that students focus efforts and feedback on weaker areas

may seem antithetical to the strengths-based foundations of the counseling profession. Some counselor educators may be concerned that the emphasis on "weakness" or "limitations" goes against one of counseling's core philosophies. Similarly, some counselor educators may be reluctant to consider themselves experts who hold the answers and should model "best" responses to a variety of client situations. Rather, we encourage counselor educators to consider deliberate practice from a growth mindset in which they integrate scientific evidence of expert performance, an acceptance of working with limitations or growth edges as necessary for improvement, and capacity for optimal counselor development. Just as counselors coconstruct goals with clients, counselor educators can co-construct personalized targets and areas of emphasis with students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Despite a broader evidence base that goes back three decades, deliberate practice has only recently emerged in counselor education. The first investigation of deliberate practice in counseling and psychotherapy was published in 2015 (see Chow et al., 2015). Since that time, deliberate practice research in the mental health professions accounts for a small number of publications. Most of these studies focused on professional mental health clinicians or psychology doctoral students, not student counselors. In order to better understand the value deliberate practice may hold, counselor educators must consider how deliberate practice can inform work with student counselors, prioritize the skills important in counselor education, and operationalize what constitutes skilled performance in counseling.

The first question is whether deliberate practice is an effective method for improving the abilities of counselors and, in turn, producing better client outcomes. Conclusions from previous research are mixed, with some authors finding skill improvement resulting from deliberate practice (Anderson et al., 2019), while others finding little to no effect on interpersonal skills (Hill et al., 2019). One method that may appeal to counselor education researchers is developing a specific protocol for



using deliberate practice in interpersonal skill development. This protocol will allow researchers to compare the use of deliberate practice with a control group that does not use the protocol. Research along these lines could use Anderson et al.'s (2009) Interpersonal Facilitative Skills assessments, Lambie et al.'s (2018) Counselor Competency Scale, or client outcome measures to assess counselor performance. Using the deliberate practice protocol as an intervention in a multiple baseline single case design with client outcomes as the outcome variable may also provide evidence that deliberate practice can improve student counselors' client outcomes. Finally, by assessing supervisees' solo practice through practice diaries or assessments designed to measure engagement in and motivation for deliberate practice, researchers may evaluate the quality of solo practice associated with deliberate practice and improved performance.

The optimal focus for deliberate and solo practice is another question that should be addressed within counselor education and supervision. Within clinical education broadly, there remains debate about what skills clinicians should possess to facilitate client outcomes. Microskills, like those measured by the Counselor Competency Scale–Revised (Lambie et al., 2018), are common but may miss nuance of broader relational skills such as instilling hope and positive expectations and navigating rupture and repair (Ridley et al., 2011). Clements-Hickman and Reese (2020) argued that research into therapist effects and client change has not provided clear evidence of a specific skill set that can be enhanced through practice. Some efforts, including the Facilitative Interpersonal Skills (Anderson et al., 2009) and Evidence-Based Relationships (Parrow et al., 2019), have attempted to operationalize these skills, but lack necessary validation. Clarifying these skills represents an important step toward agreement about what makes counselors effective and, in extension, developing effective methods to practice these skills.

Important to deliberate practice is the reality that experts practice, perform, and self-assess differently. There is no current agreement about what comprises expertise or superior performance

in counseling. Previous researchers used clients' outcomes (e.g., Chow et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2015; Rønnestad et al., 2019) and measures of interpersonal skill (Anderson et al., 2009) to measure clinician performance. Researchers can draw on previous research regarding expertise development in counseling and statistical modeling to facilitate exploration of skilled clinicians. Once high-performing counselors are identified, researchers can assess their practice efforts via practice diaries (Chow et al., 2015; Ericsson et al., 1993), "think aloud" techniques, or other novel methods to disentangle the strategies they use (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). By establishing a clearer picture of outcomes and process of high-quality skill development in counseling, counselor educators can focus more on how to help student counselors develop these skills more effectively.

### Conclusion

Based on the science of expertise development, deliberate practice differentiates top performers from more average performers in a variety of fields (Ericsson, 2019; Ericsson et al., 1993; Tuffiash et al., 2007). Recently, psychologists began investigating whether deliberate practice holds the same promise for mental health professionals. Deliberate practice resembles a variety of current practices in counselor education and can provide a framework for facilitating greater skill development among student counselors. With further research into methods, targets, and outcomes of deliberate practice, deliberate practice holds promise for helping counselors improve the quality of care they provide to clients.

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