

## **Teaching Counseling Theories and Interventions: Using Bracketing and Self-Application for Transformative Learning**

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### **Author Biography**

Michele B. Hill, PhD, is an Associate Professor and the Associate Department Head of Psychological Sciences at the University of North Georgia. She is a licensed psychologist, educator, and active scholar in research on college student mental well-being, specializing in practical strategies to support health through mindful stress-coping strategies and applied crisis intervention. She fosters transformative learning in her courses through critical self-reflection and practical application of complex content to prepare students for real world application. The University System of Georgia Board of Regents has recognized her with the Felton Jenkins, Jr. Hall of Fame Faculty Award.

Jennifer M. Hightower, PhD, NCC is a recent graduate in Counselor Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and an alumna of the University of North Georgia where she studied under Michele Hill and Georgia State University where she received a master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Jennifer teaches from a Transformational Learning Theory perspective and incorporates self-reflective exercises with her graduate students. Jennifer has experience teaching courses such as: Cross Cultural Counseling, Crisis Counseling, and Human Sexuality. Jennifer's research interests include multicultural issues in counseling, with a particular focus on working with the LGBTQ+ community, crisis, and suicidality.

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### **Goal of the Activity**

Most students in my Clinical and Counseling Theories class hope to pursue a career in a helping field such as counseling or social work. As they are introduced to each theory, they encounter the theorist's worldview, influences, and perspectives on distress and growth. To help students engage meaningfully with each new theory, they keep a *Personal Experience Journal*. The first entry is a *Bracketing Activity* to foster awareness of the impact of their worldviews and prior knowledge on their comprehension of the material. Students then apply the theory to themselves through *Self-Application Activities* that facilitate their understanding and application of the new material while connecting it to their worldviews.

### **Personal Experience Journal**

The Personal Experience Journal is a series of in-class self-application activities used to scaffold students' learning of the counseling theories they are applying to their own lives. The goal of this cumulative experience is to deepen students' overall understanding of counseling theories through real-time instruction and formative feedback, while enabling the instructor to monitor students' integration of material through application.

### **Bracketing Activity: First Journal Entry**

The Bracketing Activity forms the base for students' Personal Experience Journal and requires students to explore prior learning and experiences that have shaped their attitudes and beliefs about the foundational concepts of counseling.

**Bracketing Activity Instructions:**

The goal of your bracket is to examine your thoughts, opinions, and beliefs that you have related to counseling theories. You will write a critical self-reflection paper that addresses the following questions:

- What is your view of human nature?
- What leads people to experience mental health difficulties?
- What helps people overcome barriers and thrive?
- What have been the sources of influence in the formation of the attitudes and beliefs you hold?

*Figure 1: Bracketing Activity Instructions*

**Student Learning and Feedback**

Bracketing requires students to identify their experiences and assumptions that influence how they engage with course content. While it is not expected that students will suspend judgment at this juncture of learning, this activity provides me with insight into the lenses through which my students first encounter the material. Students come to understand the importance of bracketing as they learn that all theories address the same questions from different perspectives.

Students often find the bracketing activity challenging as they reflect on their view of human nature. Most students attribute mental health distress to a lack of coping, environmental influences, or inheritance, and their identified reasons for thriving rarely include counseling. Students generally focus on the need for better coping, personal strength, or religious practices to thrive. Most cite family, personal experience, books, and religion as their source of influence.

**Self-Application Activities**

After completing the bracketing activity, students begin the weekly self-application activities which allow them to apply each theory to themselves and reflect on how it fits within their bracket. In facilitating activities, I provide directions for the specific activity, the amount of time they have to work, and I instruct them to select a life event or stressor that they are willing to share with me and that will not cause them distress in class. They are reminded of their counseling ethics to act with respect and empathy for others, and to maintain the confidentiality of the group. Because of the personal nature of these activities, students may become upset or stuck as they work. If they are upset or stuck, I remain calm, speak quietly with the student, and use a quick adaptive coping exercise such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or cognitive memory tasks that will refocus them. These are incorporated into class and foster an environment of productivity and safety.

**Self-Application Instructions for Students**

There will be in-class structured activities provided to you to apply the theories to your own struggles as a student. They will be completed in your journal and kept confidential. I will be the only person to have access to them.

- You will complete these during class so I can work with you on appropriate application.
- Select an issue that is not deeply personal and that you can work on it safely in class. You will reflect on how your personal attitudes influence how you engage in the activity and relate to the theory. You will turn in your journal at the end of each activity.

*Figure 2: Self-Application Instructions for Students*

**Example of Self-Application Activity: Break the Cognitive Cycle**

The following is a specific example of a self-application used in class that focuses on the cognitive cycle. From time to time, we all struggle with situations that cause us to think, feel, and behave in unproductive ways. Identify a specific situation that has recently caused you to be stuck. Some students focus on grades, tests, classes, or relationships. Pick one for yourself. We will use a simplified cognitive cycle/triad to work through how this event affects your thinking, feelings, and behaviors (Figure 3).

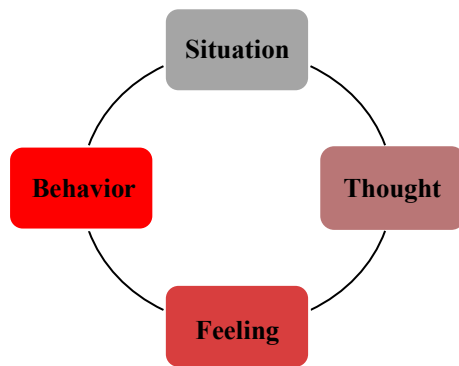


Figure 3: The Cognitive Cycle

1. Draw the diagram in your journal and input a situation that is causing you to have negative thoughts. Input the specific thought and the resulting feeling and behavior.
2. You will redraw the diagram and be more specific in identifying the part of the situation that is causing distress. Write in the thought and resulting feeling and behavior. Once you can get to a constructive thought, determine the new feeling and action behavior.
3. Finally, realize you can break this cycle at any point. Write a short self-reflection on how this experience has helped you understand yourself. How does this theory fit with your bracket? What was blocking your progress? Discuss how you might be able to implement this new change (see Figure 4).

### Student Feedback & Learning

Using self-application activities helps students connect with the dense theories on a deeper level. Data on exams from the semesters in which these activities were conducted are 10% higher than other semesters, indicating an increased ability to apply content. Students often use their journals to provide me with feedback throughout the semester and report experiencing transformative learning, in particular perspective transformation, as they continually engage with their bracket and work to incorporate new content. Additionally, many students have noted that engaging in this way enabled them to not only learn the course content but also to learn more about themselves through the process. Students report an increased ability to engage meaningfully with content beyond this course based on the model provided.

### Application Beyond Counseling

The Personal Experience Journal keeps the exercises and reflections together for students to recognize growth over the course. The Bracketing Activity can be used by any class to gauge potential impact of student worldviews and prior learning, and the Cognitive Cycle activity is an easy tool to maintain classroom mental health. My students use this and other activities as active coping strategies in their daily lives.

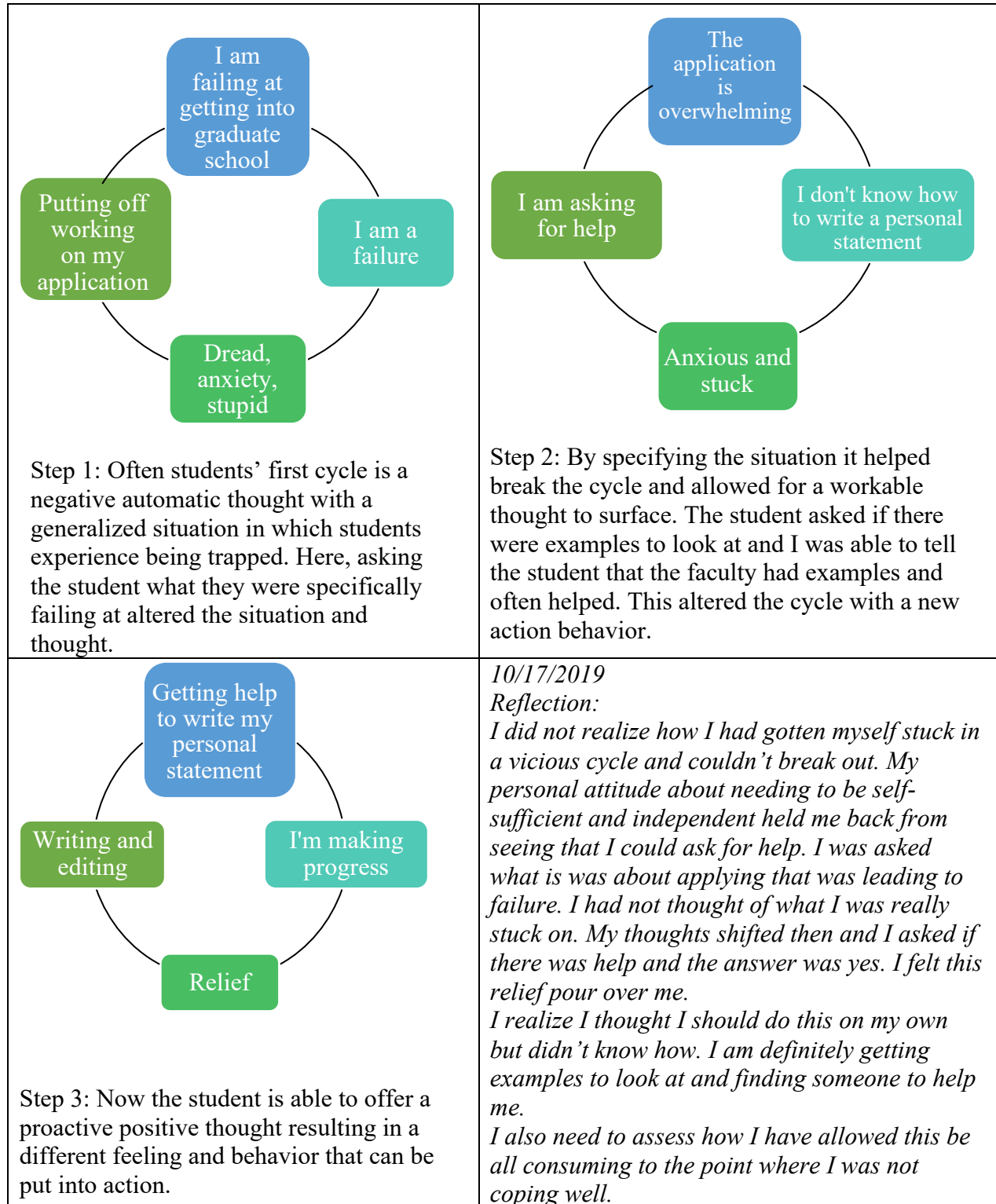


Figure 4: Senior Student Example of Breaking the Cognitive Cycle