Lesson Proper for Week 7

The Integrative Processing Model

The Integrative Processing Model builds upon existing knowledge about how experiential learning occurs and about learning styles. This model is described as “integrative” because it calls upon you, as a fieldwork student, to draw upon many components of yourself and your knowledge as well as on multiple ways of thinking to extract maximum learning and meaning from your experiences. During your fieldwork, the Integrative Processing Model will serve as a tool to help you reflect upon and think through your field experiences carefully and systematically, integrating major components from your education, including knowledge of theory and content, self-awareness, and professional ethics. Your knowledge, behavior, attitudes, emotions, and values all come into play as you process your experiences using this model. The Integrative Processing Model consists of the following steps that are repeated recursively throughout your internship: (1) gathering objective data from the concrete experience, (2) reflecting, (3) identifying relevant theory and knowledge, (4) examining dissonance, (5) articulating learning, and (6) developing a plan.

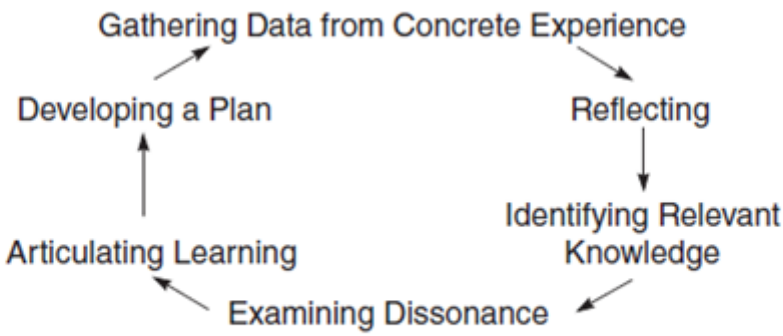

FIGURE 4.3
The Integrative Processing Model

This model is equally useful to those students working in direct services with clients and those working in administration, community education, macro practice, and other indirect services. You may use it as a structure for written reflection and analysis of your experiences, as a framework for discussing your experiences, or as a purely cognitive process. The model also provides a structure for writing meaningful, constructive papers or journal entries about your internship. Writing your responses will help you to think through each step of the process thoroughly and carefully.

Step 1: Gathering Objective Data from Concrete Experience

Models of learning from experience assert that learning begins with experience itself (Bogo & Vayda, 1995; Kolb, 1984). In your fieldwork, each experience can form the basis for learning as you examine it more deeply. The experience may be one in which you are an active participant or an observer. In subsequent steps of the Integrative Processing Model, this experience becomes the focus for reflection and application of knowledge. In this first step of the process, you are asked to observe the event carefully in order to perceive information about the situation and about the behaviors, actions, and/or interventions of the various participants. Simple though this may seem, objectivity is a difficult skill to develop. As you seek to observe the concrete experience, rely as much as you can on what your five sense senses tell you. What exactly did you see and hear? In some situations it might also be relevant to observe what you felt through the sense of touch or even what you smelled. The key point in this step of the process is to try to purely observe rather than make interpretations, form impressions, draw conclusions, or make assumptions.

Some would argue that it is impossible for any of us to reach this level of objectivity in our observations, and it is certainly the case that all of us observe events through the lenses of our own backgrounds, experiences, assumptions, and biases. Through this step of the model you are being challenged to sort out your direct observations from all of these other factors. In essence, the goal is to develop the ability to remove the various filters through which you see an experience so that your observations are as distortion-free as possible. This is a challenging task in itself that must be cultivated over time. To help you develop this skill, you might draw upon some additional resources.

For example, if there were staff members present in a particular situation, you might speak with them about what they observed, trying to identify any differences in the various perceptions you hear about. Comparing others' perceptions to each other and to your own can be helpful in sorting out the details of the events. In some circumstances you might arrange for your supervisor to observe an upcoming experience and provide an objective view of the situation. You might (with the permission of any other participants) audiotape or videotape a few of your interactions in the internship so you can literally hear and/or see yourself and review the experience from the outside looking in. Writing process recordings in which you re-create the dialogue (both verbal and nonverbal) between yourself and others as precisely as possible can be another useful method of gathering objective data. An additional advantage of this approach is that it helps you to develop your own skills as a participant-observer— that

is, to engage actively in the interaction as well as to stand outside the interaction psychologically and watch it. Objective information, retrieved from the concrete experience by a variety of methods during Step 1, provides the focus for subsequent steps in the Integrative Processing Model.

Step 2: Reflecting

In Step 2 of the Integrative Processing Model, you will engage in personal reflection by assessing what you yourself brought to the situation and your own reaction to the experience. You might think of this step as examining your "involvement of self" in the task at hand. How does this situation touch upon your own values? How does it relate to your personal history or similar experiences that you might have had? What thoughts and emotions did this situation trigger in you? What assumptions are you making or were you making about the situation? What assumptions are you making or were you making about the people involved in the experience, including yourself?

Another important component of reflection is evaluation of your own behavior in the concrete experience. As you examine your verbal and nonverbal behavior in the situation, what behaviors enhanced your effectiveness? What behaviors diminished your effectiveness?

Human services education emphasizes that professionals must develop and maintain a high degree of self-awareness in order to function effectively in the field. The reflection required in Step 2 helps to raise your awareness of the feelings, attitudes, behaviors, values, and assumptions that you are bringing to a particular experience. A lack of self-awareness can create paralyzing roadblocks for even the most academically talented students

Step 3: Identifying Relevant Theory and Knowledge

As discussed earlier, transfer of learning is a key goal of internships. Students engaged in fieldwork that is linked with professional preparation must make connections between what they have learned in the classroom and what they experience in the field. Step 3 of the Integrative Processing Model requires you to identify theoretical, conceptual, and/or empirical information that can shed light on the situation at hand. The information you have recorded in the previous steps of the model may constitute only a set of relatively meaningless, disjointed facts if examined outside the context of relevant theory and knowledge. Although previous classroom learning forms the foundation for Step 3, you might also need to engage in more extensive reading and research to expand your knowledge in order to understand the experience more fully.

For example, if you are working in an administrative role during your field experience, you might draw upon your existing knowledge of organizational theory and leadership theory but find that you need to do additional reading about models of supervision and strategic planning. If your fieldwork involves direct services to clients, you might draw upon your knowledge of theories regarding human behavior, the dynamics of the helping relationship, and the stages of the helping process, but feel the need to do additional reading about a particular client's presenting problem or a particular issue in family dynamics.

Against the backdrop of relevant knowledge, certain information identified in the previous steps of the Integrative Processing Model may rise to the foreground in its importance, whereas other information might become relatively less significant. Some facts may begin to cluster together, bearing some relationship to one another, forming a more cohesive picture, pattern, or theme. In Step 3 of the Integrative Processing Model, the application of knowledge—theoretical, conceptual, or empirical— provides an organizing focus, a lens through which you can view and make sense of your experiences. Insights that can inform and guide your future work frequently emerge from this important step of the process.

Step 4: Examining Dissonance

Dissonance can exist on a number of levels as you react to your experiences. You might experience intellectual dissonance as competing theories or bodies of knowledge offer divergent points of view (Step 3) or as conflicting information arises out of the concrete experience itself (Step 1). You might experience dissonance between the espoused theories of the profession and your own personal views. You might find that your thoughts and feelings clash (e.g., "I know I am supposed to be warm and empathic toward my clients, but I really don't like this person"). Conflicts might also occur between theory and practice ("I did what we discussed in class, but it didn't work") and between your thoughts and behavior ("I know what I am supposed to do, but I just can't do it right" or "I know what I am supposed to do, but I just can't make myself do it"). Following are some guiding questions that can help you to identify points of dissonance in your work:

· What, if anything, do I feel uncomfortable about in this situation?

· What disagreement is there between what I "should" do and what I "want" to do?

· What mismatch is there between what I "should" do and what I "must" do?

· What conflict is there between competing "should" in the situation?

· What disagreement is there between my personal views of the situation and views offered by the theories and knowledge of the profession?

· What conflict is there between what I "know" and what I "do"? (Hutchings & Wurtzdorff, 1988)

Becoming clearly aware of dissonance is the first step in its resolution. Once recognized, such dissonance can often be resolved. The values and ethical principles of the profession in many instances provide a useful framework for resolving dissonance. Values such as client self-determination, respect for the client's culture, recognition of client dignity and worth, appreciation of individual uniqueness, confidentiality, and no manipulative intervention are examples of useful guiding principles in reconciling conflicting points of view.

It is also realistic to point out that at times the dissonance that you experience may not be reconcilable. Sometimes, rather than reconciling dissonance, you must simply learn to accept it and operate within it. These situations can require a great deal of work and personal growth, providing some of your most profound learning.

Dissonance may not be involved in every experience, but it does occur frequently for those working in the human service field, whether as an intern or as a professional. Although the issues confronted in this step of the model are difficult and often uncomfortable, dissonance is a necessary and productive part of learning within your field experience. All professionals, experienced and inexperienced, grow as we acquire the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to embrace competing values, to come to terms with our own personal and professional limitations, and even to come to terms with the limitations of the profession and current knowledge within the field. Through confronting and struggling with difficult issues in your internship, you will experience some of your most significant and meaningful learning and personal growth. In doing so, you will bring your total self to bear upon the learning experience as you grapple with knowledge, skills, personal reactions, and values in the effort to achieve a greater degree of congruence. Through this process, genuine learning occurs, and professional maturity and wisdom develop.

Step 5: Articulating Learning

Students often report with excitement that they are “learning so much” from their fieldwork, but when specifically asked what they have learned, they all too often fall silent or lapse into vague generalizations. This scenario perhaps reflects the fact that, although students might indeed have learned a great deal, they have not thought carefully enough about this learning to be able to put it into words. Step 5, Articulating Learning, requires you to put your learning into words. Using words to explain and describe what you have learned pushes you to conceptualize your learning. Through writing, a dim awareness can become clarified into a coherent statement. Once you have constructed this statement, the knowledge becomes more clearly your own. You then have greater command over this learning as a more tangible, concrete, and lasting “possession” that you can retrieve, use, and adapt as needed.

The guiding question in this step of the model is straightforward: “What are the major lessons that I can take from this experience?” The lessons learned may have to do with skills that you developed, theoretical knowledge that you gained, insights that you developed about yourself or others, or deeper understanding that you acquired of an ethical principle or other issue in the human service field. The learning you identify might be fairly concrete, such as a particular skill that you have acquired or information that you have gained. Often your learning might take the form of an abstract principle based on inductive reasoning about the situation.

For example, after working with your supervisor and multiple staff members in the organization, you might be able to articulate some guiding principles for navigating your relationships with them based on agency culture and norms as you perceive them. Whether you are learning is more concrete or abstract, the Integrative Processing

Model suggests that you take that learning into your subsequent experiences in the internship, testing it and evaluating it. In doing so, the original lessons learned may be reinforced, refined, revised, or refuted. Through this process, you not only grow in your knowledge and skills but also acquire the skills and habits of an active learner, equipped to continue learning from experience throughout your career.

Step 6: Developing a Plan

The final step, developing a Plan, is a two-pronged step in that it calls upon you to think through (1) how to proceed in your work (Bogo & Vayda, 1995) and (2) how to proceed in your own learning and development. Each of these topics is considered in this section.

The thinking you have done in Steps 1–5 provides a solid foundation for making an informed choice about how to proceed in your work. In some situations, working through Steps 1–5 may lead you to a clear action path, but in many situations, a number of alternatives will be available. Step 6, developing a Plan, consists largely of decision making through identifying, evaluating, and selecting from various alternatives.

Ideas for alternative courses of action might emerge from Steps 3 and 5 of the Integrative Processing Model. Application of knowledge in Step 3, Identifying Relevant Knowledge, yields implications for practice, generating ideas for potential courses of action. Learning identified in Step 5, Articulating Learning, may also hold implications for future action. Although Steps 3 and 5 are particularly helpful at this point, the work done in any or all of the steps of the Integrative Processing Model might offer ideas for additional options as well as support for or reservations about certain options. Additionally, your organizational context might have bearing on the plan that you develop. Common agency practices often suggest or reinforce certain options, while agency policies and protocols will more clearly direct or even dictate the next steps in some situations.

In Step 6, identify and weigh each alternative plan considering the following:

1. What are the likely consequences of this plan?
2. What factors and forces support the selection of this plan and the likelihood of its effective implementation?
3. What factors and forces argue against the selection of this plan or present obstacles to its effective implementation? Out of these considerations, you will select a plan for how to approach your future work.

Depending upon the significance of its focus, the plan you develop might very well require review by your supervisor. Even so, in order to develop autonomy it is best to develop a tentative plan as independently as possible. Submitting written summaries of your experiences to your supervisor and your thoughts about future action plans can be beneficial in this regard, ensuring that you think independently, get feedback before you proceed with your plan, prepare adequately for your supervisory conferences, and use your supervision time in a

focused, efficient manner. Due to time constraints alone, it is impossible to discuss thoroughly every experience that you have with your supervisor. Written summaries enable you and your supervisor to identify the most difficult situations for close review in your supervisory sessions, whereas less difficult situations might be more quickly discussed.

In addition to developing a plan for your future work, an equally important element in this step of the model is developing plans for your own learning. As you work through the steps of the model and make plans for subsequent work, you will more clearly recognize gaps in your knowledge or skills that need to be addressed. In developing a plan for your future work, you must also assess whether you currently have the knowledge and skills required to implement that plan successfully. If you find that you need to develop additional knowledge or skills, a plan for your learning might include any number of activities, such as reading, observing another worker, attending a workshop or seminar, or doing a role play with your supervisor. Developing a plan for future learning might also at times focus on personal development issues rather than knowledge or skills. For many students working on personal issues that emerge through Step 2, Reflecting, or Step 4, Recognizing Dissonance, often proves to be among the most challenging and fruitful aspects of their internships.

Once plans are developed for your continued work and learning, you are poised to begin the learning cycle again. In cases in which you will have no immediate opportunity for continued work with the particular project, task, or client that has been the focus of your reflections, think in terms of similar situations that you might encounter in the future. Consider the question “How might I handle things the next time I approach a similar task or situation?” Whether this next experience is tomorrow or sometime well into the future, thinking through your plan forms a basis for your activity in another professional experience. Whenever it may be, your future work will likely offer you new opportunities in which to apply and test the plan that you developed based on what you have learned from this experience. As you engage in these new experiences, you will be starting the learning process again at Step 1, Gathering Objective Data from Concrete Experience.

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