
Educating for Response-able counselling

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Abstract

The ability to account for where one stands and what one does is integral to counsellor education. This paper explores several principles of responsibility as expressed in the counsellor education program at the University of Alberta. This is followed by a brief description of how these principles are carried out in practice.

Résumé

L'habileté de l'individu à rendre compte de sa position et de ce qu'il fait, fait partie intégrante de l'éducation du conseiller. Cet article explore plusieurs principes de responsabilité comme ils sont exprimés dans le programme d'éducation du conseiller à l'Université d'Alberta. Ceci est suivi par une brève description sur comment ces principes sont mis en pratique.

As we prepare counsellors for the last decade of the twentieth century, the concept of "responsibility" seems more important than ever. At a time when accountability in clinical practice is receiving renewed stress, responsibility takes on new relevance. But responsibility is also an elusive word. It has two principal meanings. One is to be responsible in the sense of having an obligation. The second is to be responsible in the sense of not just *having* the obligation, but being *able to respond* and give an accounting of where one stands and what one does. This article explores both meanings in regard to counsellor education, but especially the sense of response-ability.

The scope of this article is to explore a program of counsellor education at the masters level in a Canadian university (in this case, the University of Alberta) to illustrate one attempt at working out a program for response-ability. It is not presented as a model of how it should be done, but as an example of how it has been attempted. This article outlines some of the principles on which one program has been built over the years, and describes (briefly enough not to be boring, but deep enough to reflect these principles adequately) what the program presently offers. Cause and effect decisions are left up to the reader.

This article informally enters the field of counsellor education by the "back door" of experience rather than the "front door" of philosophy, traditional experimental research or review of the literature. The "objectivity" of such a report is consequently in doubt. A rider to the effect that the views presented are primarily those of the present author is important from the beginning.

Throughout this paper I use the term "counsellor education" rather than "counsellor training." The reason for this is that "training" can

connote mere skill acquisition, whereas “education” includes, but transcends skills training and is, at its root meaning, a process of drawing out the student both as a scholar and as a person.

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICE

What the Student Brings to the Program is Important

Each student brings to any program his or her own theory of what counselling is all about. No student enters a counsellor education program without a vestige of a theory. Many students perhaps cannot enunciate their philosophy, but all begin with at least an implicit concept of how counselling works and what it should do. The first task of counsellor education is to initiate the process (which must then be ongoing) of bringing that which is only implicit into awareness. The student reflects upon and becomes conscious of the theoretical position he or she already holds. The next task is to scrutinize it in light of other theories and make a choice about what fits best and also has some objective value as expressed in philosophy, psychological research, and the experience of others. The faculty delimits alternatives presented, and at the same time offers some criteria, philosophical, scientific and experiential, to equip the student with the tools of critical examination. Ultimately the goal is to encourage students to be “response-able” — able to give a reply based on theory when asked why they think what they think and do what they do in practice.

The “fit” between self and theories, however, is not only a matching of the theories learned with skills operationalized in some disembodied manner. It is also a match of theoretical knowledge with insight into one’s own way of being in the world. Furthermore, it is a match between the concept of “I” and the experience of being a counsellor.

Learning by Doing. The Interplay of Theory and Practice

Experience is crucial, not as something to be added on to theory, but as the key to true comprehension of theory. The ancient “counsellor educator” Confucius summed up the process in these words:

I hear and I forget
I see and I remember
I do and I understand

This strategy for true understanding imitates, I think, the way in which many classical theorists have come to understand or “learned” their own theories. Lofty theories of counselling espoused in great tomes are often more the result of what their author is — the theoretician’s own personality, and what works for him or her in practice — than what he or she “thinks.” It is no coincidence, for example, that grandfatherly

Carl Rogers wrote volumes on “unconditional positive regard,” while the sharper-edged Albert Ellis expounded on the necessity of straightening out the client’s thinking. Theory is not all in the head. It is largely a function of personality. Students, if given the option, will settle on a philosophy which fits them personally and which has become vividly impressed not just by seeing but by doing.

In fact, a student’s awareness of the idiosyncratic nature of theory can clarify their goals from the beginning. Slavish imitation; “out-Rogering Rogers” is not called for. The goal, rather, is to learn as much as one can about the varieties of counselling theory, measure them with the template of one’s own intellectual and personal self, and work out one’s own way of being a counsellor, able to give responsible answers for what one does.

Options are Important

The previous point is based on an assumption that the student will actually be given options. It is, I think, important for counselling students to be given a variety of options, not only in the array of theories they study, but in the role playing they go through in trying on different theoretical guises in the search for self as counsellor. The interactional factor in the development of a personal theory is missed if the theories presented are few in number or if they are taught in a vacuum of practice. Becoming a counsellor is discovering an important personal identity. This is best done (as in the identity crisis of the adolescent), by trying on different roles in real life.

However, *In medio stat virtus*. Somehow the counsellor education program must maintain a happy medium between the extremes of exposure to a very narrow range of views and an equally unappealing kind of jackdaw eclecticism based on sampling a whole smorgasbord of ill cooked meat and unripened fruit.

Exploring Possibilities and Clarifying Goals

Exposed to a variety of views, the student should be able to answer the questions: “What can I offer?” and “To whom am I closest in my view of counselling and what I do?” Here, again, the combination of practice while exploring theory leads to “response-ability.” A supervisor’s question, “Why did you use the two-chair technique with Mrs. A.?” deserves a better answer than, “Because we took it last week in class, and it looked interesting.”

In essence the supervisor helps students evaluate what they plan to do, in a single session or across a whole course of treatment, by clarifying: their view of person, their concept of how change comes about, their ideas about where change should lead, and ultimately their concrete

criteria in the real, phenomenal world for knowing when they have succeeded. Frequently the student's "stuckness" expressed in terms of "What should I do next?" is undone by answering for themselves the question: "What do I want to achieve?" The end clarifies the means.

Clarifying the goals of a single session or a whole treatment plan leads to three kinds of response-ability:

1. knowing the end clarifies the means to be chosen toward that end.
2. knowing the goal clarifies the criteria for success that will be used, allowing a clear and happy termination when the goals have been reached
3. knowing the purpose clarifies another important responsibility: the legal and ethical responsibility of the client-counsellor relationship.

Being Present

There is a risk in all this. Responsibility, like all self assessment, in its beginnings is primarily self-consciousness. Initially, the student is pulled between being present to the client and being aware of the presences behind the one way mirror, or the eye of the video camera. With practice, encouragement and some successes, students can shift figure and ground; egocentrism yielding to allocentrism. The student becomes open to what is going on, and approaches his or her clients with an intense awareness that these people, more than any exams or supervisor's ratings, are a test of who he or she is. The ultimate criterion of success is attention paid to the client's real concerns. Like Linda says to her wayward sons in *Death of a Salesman*: "Attention must be paid." Her words contain not only a note of urgency and care for Willie, her husband, but a deep feeling of respect for poor Willie Loman, the identified patient.

Counselling as Challenge

Counsellor education is, by its nature, a combination of challenge and success. There is a rhythm of high points and low. Students have often expressed their awareness that the counselling theory and practicum core courses are the most important they will take in their program. They approach with appropriate apprehension. Their appreciation of what is involved usually shows in their investment of a proportionate amount of time and energy into the program and their willingness to experience a degree of personal disintegration. The reward at the end is not only what they have learned but what they have become. Counsellor education transcends mere theory and skill learning. It is more than the acquisition of a new career. It is rather an intense experience in learning and in personal development.

The Mentor Relationship

If intense personal demands are made of students, these same demands are made of staff. Counsellor education, if it is to emphasize human relationships, must itself be humane in its relationships between staff and students. Perhaps some sciences can be taught from a distance, but the art of counselling calls for real, personal relationships between mentor and learner. Part of this relationship is the role that modeling plays. The most persistent request I have heard addressed to staff is: "Show us what *you* do. The Rogers films were great; the tapes of Ellis, Perls and Milton Erikson were really helpful, but show us what *you* do." There is a powerful learning experience in being able to link up someone you know as a person with how they behave as a counsellor. To see the counsellor staff in practice, complete not only with their intuitive strokes of genius but with their gaffs and foibles, conveys a reality element that is precious and potent. Perhaps the best response we know of to this need is not only individual supervision, but co-counselling and live supervision with its gradual shifting of more responsibility onto the shoulders of the student.

Other Students — the Heart of the Program

One of the best things about any counselling program is the other people in it. Students share common attributes and values. They are intelligent caring people; academics pointed in the direction of practice. In a year of heavy academic pressure and intense personal demands, class friends, "those who know what its like without having to have it all explained to them," are essential for personal sharing, support, and for some of the practical exigencies that come up. Getting to know their colleagues and discover their resources early in the program is important.

Counselling as a Profession

Counsellor educators are preparing people to enter a profession. Consequently the task of education involves introducing students to professional groups such as C.G.C.A., and appropriate provincial organizations. Awareness of these organizations not only creates the possibility of joining and getting to know colleagues, but brings beginning counsellors into contact with established professional codes of ethics.

Counselling as a Journey of Self Through Systems

Becoming a counsellor is, it seems to me, a journey of self, a journey undertaken, as it must be, before the counsellor asks the client to do the same. It is an opportunity to realize the demands and the delights of the

process. The movement is one of exploring self in the system: initially in the systems from which one comes to do counselling, and then in the systems involved within the confines of the counselling room. The movement is outward, through ever-widening concentric circles. It begins with personal self and the systems of one's own life, and moves outward through classroom, seminar and supervision to appreciate and join the systems clients bring with them. With a sound sense of their own identity, and of the principles of organization of ecosystems, beginning counsellors can risk joining in the systems of the individual, couple or family they are seeing. Initially they join to understand and empathize. Later they may join, as Minuchin says, in order to jar.

The System of Counsellor Education Needs Feedback

Since a program of counsellor education is itself a system, it calls not only for engagement but feedback into the system by all involved, particularly the staff and students. This is another form of responsibility. Supervision and seminars are prime occasions for this two-way flow of feedback, from mentor to student and from student back to mentor. A program that teaches caring must itself be a caring system if it is to be authentic. The responsibility of staff for the success of the program is a given. The willingness of the students to contribute beyond their own personal gain to the overall success of the program is something that is generously given too. It can be encouraged by making feedback opportunities available in print form or in assessment sessions shared by staff and students. Feedback becomes meaningful when it is seen to effect change.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

The thrust of a counsellor program should encourage the student to consciously construct and be able to explain his or her own personal theory of counselling. It should encourage the student to be aware of and ultimately responsible for the philosophical foundations and the personal manner of what he or she does in counselling. In other words, a counsellor education program should combine:

learning with reflection, to personalize
academic theories with practice, to integrate
techniques with wisdom, to guide.

These goals involve exposure to classical theories of counselling for critical review, forming some guidelines for creating one's own personal theory. This melding of self discovery and philosophical discovery has as its goal a fuller consciousness of what we do and the ability to give a responsible rationale of why we do it.

SOME PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO COUNSELLOR EDUCATION

If, as I maintained above, counsellor education involves a process of self reflection, the opportunity to initiate this process is best given early in the program as an invitation to reflect upon oneself as a person and as a counsellor. This is the theme of the initial segment of our counselling program at the masters level. It aims at providing some vital transition time between one's ordinary world and the challenges to change that lie ahead. For the student the process of transition in this segment is from seeing self as a student, teacher, wife, husband, father, mother to seeing self also as a counsellor, (at that moment frequently a frightening but exciting proposition). The transition is positive, moving from the threats to self anticipated in this process to appreciating "what you have going for you." The process of this first unit begins with an introduction to these immediate resources. Its general approach is multidimensional and as methodologically rich as possible. It looks at early learnings, the family of origin, injunctions, other contextual influences, and, ultimately, values. This process calls for time, and time is given both for individual reflection and sharing. Individual reflection is often expressed in written journal-like statements or art. Left brain and right brain are engaged in the process, sometimes with startling discoveries. Students are encouraged to share their experiences and feelings in small groups, listen and give support and affirmation to one another. In the process they not only get support but find themselves capable of counselling in a helpful way. That basic paradox of finding oneself in discovering and caring for another, becomes a reality in doing from the very beginning something very natural — caring. I doubt if empathy can be taught, but it can be elicited.

CONCLUSION

No counsellor education program is perfect. The one I have described is not an exception to this rule. In these days of short budgets and short staff, not all that is desirable is possible. A program is as good as the people registered in it and the people co-ordinating and teaching it. I believe the program described here is the result of a solid theoretical base laid down by past professionals. It benefits from a good number of years of experience with literally hundreds of students whose feedback has consistently been listened to and used in the numerous revisions the program has undergone, is undergoing, and will, no doubt, undergo in the future. Revision, polishing, honing is integral to it all. In a sense, this last "principle" of constant revision has made my task of writing about the *present* state of the program more difficult. For even as I write these words, the winds of change are blowing under my office door. Maybe even a counsellor educator is asked to be "response-able."

About the Author

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