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THE USE OF COACHED CLIENTS IN SUMMER PRACTICUM PROGRAMS

ABSTRACT: This paper discussed the use of coached clients in summer counselor education programs. The coached clients were utilized to assist in developing basic communication skills, in learning goal-setting and case handling procedures, and for practicing particular counseling techniques. Some of the benefits in using coached clients in summer practicum programs were discussed. They can be used to give the counselor trainees personal feedback and to help evaluate recorded interviews. The importance of the selection and training of the coached clients was emphasized. Some of the positive and negative reactions of students included in the programs were given, with suggestions for future improvements.

For three consecutive years at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the summer prepracticum, practicum, and advanced practicum courses in School Counseling have utilized coached clients as an integral part of the training program. The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the procedures in the training of coached clients, the variety of purposes for which their participation was felt to be advantageous, and a general evaluation of the program. The coached clients provided an extended learning situation, in addition to the other practical and theoretical experiences, in each practicum level.

The inclusion of coached clients as a part of the learning experience in the summer program was primarily an attempt to meet some of the special problems involved in summer practicum courses. There has been an increasing enrolment with a cross section of teachers, counselors, and administrators wanting to improve their counseling skills. As the schools are not in full operation, the number of available clients for the school practicum experience is limited to special summer school students. This greatly restricts the number of potential clients for counselors in training. Also, the six-week summer course offers an intensified practicum concentrated over a shorter time than

in the winter session programs. Thus, the introduction of coached clients was necessitated principally to deal with a situation involving more counselor trainees, with fewer available clients, and in a more concentrated period of time.

The introduction of coached clients into the summer program served many functions. The coached clients were readily available for extensive videotaping sessions. They were used to provide immediate feedback for the counselor trainees in evaluative sessions. The employment of four coached clients constituted an accessible pool of clients that were available on a daily basis. Thus, the practicum programs could handle an increased enrolment. Also, the beginning counselor could practice his interviewing skills with coached clients, without the fear of damaging a real client because of inexperience. Thus, the coached clients added dimensions to the training program that could not have been achieved in the usual school practicum experience. The use of coached clients was considered to be complementary to the remainder of the program.

The coached clients were used differentially in each level of the program. The counselor practicums at OISE begin with a "pre-practicum" experience. The goals of the pre-practicum are to aid trainees in developing basic listening and communication skills. The counselor trainees used the coached clients to tape-record initial interview situations. These sessions were observed and discussed in small groups and continuing practice was provided over the six-week summer sessions. In the practicum program, the coached clients were extensively used for video-taping. At this level, the counselor trainees were also involved in a school practicum experience with actual counselees. The coached clients were used extensively to develop particular interviewing skills, to provide immediate feedback for trainees, and for videotaping sample interviews. The goals of the practicum are to provide training in developing goal-setting and case handling skills with regard to typical types of client problems. The coached clients were often asked to return for second and third sessions to provide examples of a continuing client. At the advanced practicum level, the coached clients were used primarily for videotape analysis of more specific counseling techniques (such as gestalt therapy and systematic desensitization).

Possibly the most important aspect in the implementation of coached clients in the counseling training program was the initial selection and preliminary preparation of adolescent subjects for their counselee roles. Four coached clients were used (two males and two females) aged 15-18 years. In the first year, each of the coached clients selected had some dramatic experience. However, in the succeeding years, this was not considered to be a necessary prerequisite. The prospective coached clients were selected with particular attention given to their psychological outlook, and their concept and value of the counseling process. No attempt was made to find "typical students," as this was considered as an impossible goal. The students

chosen were for the purpose of providing a sample experience of what may occur in a school counseling setting.

The four coached clients underwent a ten-day training period during which they were prepared for their assimilated roles. The training period began with listening to a taped interview of a school counseling session, followed by a discussion of the goals and process of counseling. Then, in cooperation with their counselor trainer, the coached clients explored what roles could be effectively used and what problem situations presented. Basically, the subject material for each role came from the coached clients themselves. It was related to their personal or school experiences, or to those of their peers.

The coached client roles were formulated and developed in practice interviews, with the trainer acting as the counselor. Every effort was made to evolve realistic situations that allowed for flexibility, yet provided consistency. The emphasis was on training the coached clients to stay in role, in addition to reacting to the emotional spirit of the moment. The approach used was to begin with a thematic problem that could be developed (and modified if necessary) in an initial counseling interview. Several others were evolved that could be extended into further interview sessions in the practicum and advanced practicum groups. The assimilated roles were tape-recorded and analyzed by the trainer and the coached clients during the training period. Each coached client was video-taped in an interview session at the end of the training period. Thus, each client could evaluate and react to his own presentation.

The repertoire of roles that were developed for use by the coached clients was rather varied and diverse. It included aspects of academic, vocational, and personal counseling that would be readily found in most school counseling settings. The thematic problems presented vocational choice, academic program selection, study habits, discipline problems at school, as well as family and personal problems. Thus, the sample of counseling situations ranged from rather straightforward educational topics to relatively complex personal conflicts.

As described, the development of the assimilated roles was done primarily by the coached clients, in cooperation with their counselor trainer. Some of these roles were based on a statistical summation of the types of presenting problems and extended therapy sessions that had been dealt with in previous winter practicum sessions at OISE. Thus, all of the assimilated roles were derived either from previous personal or professional experiences. Each coached client developed a personal repertoire of at least six basic thematic problems. Although the group practicum leaders sometimes requested specific types of counseling problems for particular analysis, generally the individual coached client decided what role he or she would present in each individual session.

A rather significant development during the three-year evolution of the summer session program involved the coached clients' increasing

use of their own personal life situations in the counseling sessions. They began to utilize the interviews as an opportunity to explore and learn about themselves. This was a facet of the learning experience that came from the coached clients themselves, and greatly enhanced their effectiveness and enthusiasm for their task. Throughout the summer periods, the counselor trainer worked closely with the coached clients primarily in a supportive role.

It was found that the coached clients needed continuing feedback as well as the counselor trainees. They were frequently involved in draining and highly charged emotional experiences. Opportunities for de-briefing sessions with staff in order to discuss their own experiences were very important. The coached clients each year reported that they had gained in personal understanding of themselves and others from their summer work experiences in the practicum programs.

The preliminary preparation of the counselor trainees was also considered to be extremely important to the introduction of coached clients into the practicum training program. Many of the counselor trainees exhibited some initial uneasiness in dealing with coached clients. They particularly feared being "trapped" or "tricked" in the counseling situation by clients who were assuming a role. Also, they tended to overreact to the fact that the clients were "coached," and thus suggested a lack of genuineness. However, preliminary discussion of the purposes for using coached clients in a learning situation, and initial involvement with the clients themselves effectively overcame these apprehensions. As the counselor trainees became more confident in their interviewing skills, they also became more accepting of exploring the learning possibilities involving the use of a coached client.

Although the coached clients were used primarily for interviewing sessions in the practicum groups, they were also employed in various other ways during the summer training program. All of the practicum group leaders had access to the coached clients on an equal time basis, and they could employ them in whatever manner they felt was useful for the group learning experience. Many of the practicum leaders introduced the coached clients to their groups in an informal "rap" session. Here the counselor trainees and the coached clients had an opportunity to exchange ideas about such topics as school, counseling, adolescence, and personal matters. Some of the practicum leaders invited the coached clients to participate in more specific discussions relating to such timely topics as drugs, sexual attitudes, and the generation gap. It appeared that both the counselor trainees and the coached clients gained new perceptions from these interchanges.

More effective utilization of the coached clients for the provision of immediate feedback for the counselor trainees evolved during the course of the three summers. This practice resulted from spontaneous discussions between the two participants after the simulated interviews. The coached clients were increasingly requested to react verbally to the interviews, immediately following the sessions, in order to provide the counselor trainee with some evaluative feedback. As the

counselor trainees repeatedly reported that this feedback was valuable to the learning experience, time was allotted for five or ten minutes of informal discussion between the coached client and trainees after each interview.

Various other methods were employed by the practicum leaders to facilitate communication between the counselor trainees and the coached clients with regard to evaluating the interviews. In some instances, the coached client was requested to complete a short questionnaire designed to assess such dimensions as establishing rapport and empathy, attending to the verbal and emotional content of the problems presented, and reacting to specified functions of the counselor trainee as a potential helping figure. With regard to the video-taped interviews, the coached clients were at times invited by the practicum leaders to participate in the evaluative discussions after reviewing the tapes. This use of the coached clients for providing immediate feedback was not fully developed and could be greatly improved in subsequent summer programs. The coached clients could be aided in their preliminary training to become more competent and more objective in evaluating the counseling sessions.

Each of the three years, as part of the course evaluation, the practicum students and the practicum leaders were asked to assess the use of coached clients, as a part of their summer school experience. The evaluations were used as the basis for further modification and development of this aspect of the summer school curriculum. All of the implications of these evaluations cannot be discussed here, but reference to some of the more common positive and negative criticisms may provide some insights as to the scope and limitations of using coached clients in a summer training course.

The majority of the prepracticum students expressed positive appreciation for an introduction to the counseling interview in a relatively non-threatening setting using coached clients. The students at all practicum levels felt that the coached clients provided a wide range of problem situations in a controlled learning experience. The counselor trainees at all practicum levels stated that they benefited from the feedback given by their practicum leaders, their peers, and the coached clients in the evaluative sessions using tape-recorded and video-taped interviews. The coached client interviews were reported to be appropriate to intense concentration on specific interviewing skills that allowed for both feedback and evaluation. The coached clients' roles were considered to be effective as both an introduction and a complement to the actual school practicum experience.

However, some aspects of the use of coached-clients met with more negative reactions. The problem of "reality" was referred to, as several of the trainees criticized the situation as contrived and unnatural. The coached clients and the problems they presented were not always perceived as being adequately involved, portraying sufficient emotion, and providing depth and scope. Thus, although the introduc-

tion of coached-clients served many purposes and fulfilled specific training goals, their effectiveness appeared to be dependent on numerous factors that could be improved upon in future summer training programs.

Summary

Coached clients can be used extensively in a counselor education program. Coached clients were used successfully to assist counselor trainees in developing basic communication skills, in learning goal-setting and case handling procedures, and for practising particular counseling techniques. Coached clients can afford a safe learning environment while providing live experiences for counselor trainees before they are put into real counseling situations. Coached clients are extremely useful for giving immediate feed-back to counseling trainees regarding their behavior and for assisting in a systematic evaluation of trainees. Coached clients should be carefully selected and given specific practice and training for whatever tasks they will be assigned. Both coached clients and counselor trainees should understand exactly the situations that they are asked to participate in together. The expectations of both groups about each other should be as realistic as possible.

Coached clients need continuing feedback and support; thus provisions are needed for debriefing sessions with staff in some instances. Coached clients provide an additional touch of reality in a counseling program. Their perspectives do exemplify honest reaction from representatives of the client population in which school counselors work. They seem able to participate in all phases of counselor training depending upon the imagination and goals of the trainers.

RESUME: Cet article étudie la possibilité d'utiliser des clients entraînés dans des programmes d'été visant à la formation de conseillers. Ces clients entraînés étaient utilisés plus particulièrement dans les domaines suivants: acquisition de techniques fondamentales de communication, apprentissage de procédures d'établissement de buts et de traitement de cas, pratique dans des techniques particulières de consultation. Quelques-uns des avantages d'utiliser des clients entraînés pour des stages pratiques d'été sont discutés. Les clients peuvent être utilisés pour fournir un feedback aux stagiaires et aider à évaluer des entretiens enregistrés. L'accent est mis sur l'importance de la sélection et la préparation des clients. Quelques-unes des réactions positives et négatives des étudiants-stagiaires sont décrites avec des suggestions pour des améliorations futures.