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Counselling for Learning

I was interested in David Pott's article *Self & Society* Vol.III No.1 about his intention to use pair work in education. I am working with a modified form of co-counselling to facilitate learning and my experience might be useful to anyone considering the application of such approaches.

As Training Officer of a Research Council I work with a team of tutors on a variety of courses. Pair or trio discussions are used on all our courses but the full peer counselling scheme is only utilized at present within the management development programme.

In this programme much of our time is spent helping members to extend their awareness and sensitivity with the objective of enabling them to act more effectively and so ultimately to help their colleagues to act effectively.

Working in a relatively unstructured way, encouraging members to take responsibility for themselves (I read Tom Osborn's article (*Self and Society* Vol.2 No.12) with great interest and considerable agreement) whilst honouring the integrity of others, peer counselling grew naturally from our activities. The present scheme operates both within the programme and outside and was fully introduced last summer, although peer counselling has been used in various forms on our courses over the last 2 years or so.

The counselling scheme itself owes much to re-evaluation co-counselling and incorporates ideas from John Heron's breakaway and John Southgate's *Dialectical & Primal Approaches* but it operates on a lower key being concerned more with problem solving and creativity than emotional discharge.

Inside the training programme, counselling is used in many ways. People discuss their expectations and objectives for courses, generate data on topics, make sense of their experience together, and look at ways of using their learning in the future. This cycle is then repeated on later courses.

The connection with work and outside is made through the application of learning, developing ideas, dealing with problems etc, and this of course also links with people's aims in future courses.

A network of ex-course members now exists and as counselling functions on a peer basis, a large group of people (well over 100) at all levels is now spread throughout the organisation individual responsibility and self direction.

At present I see the main benefits of this counselling scheme in the sphere of learning as:

1. De-mystification of the 'teacher' and of 'expertise' in general.

2. Development of the total learning situation towards a 'healthy' state e.g. open uninhibited communication, productive relationships etc.
3. Maximum use of resources e.g. access to every person's potential (knowledge, experience and skills), use of time, space etc.
4. Compatibility with (in fact facilitating) so called self-directed and group based training methods.
5. Enabling the clearance of blocks and discharge of emotions which might otherwise inhibit individual learning.
6. Assisting transfer/application of learning into 'real life'.
7. Continuation of a learning process outside formal 'teaching' situations, (not only during the course but, most important, at work etc afterwards).

There are some problems in the scheme particularly its operation outside courses which have become apparent during the first year. It takes time to build up a network and in an organisation like a research council which covers the country, contacts may not be easily available for some time. In the organisational context, unless formal objectives are involved some network members are uncertain about their use of the system and non-network staff may not accept the validity of this as an official activity. In fact it is here, in its conflicts with the norms of the organisation, that the biggest contradiction exists.

To accept emotionality and work openly and equally towards self-direction etc within a system that rests on the hierarchy and a formality inherent in government organisations, poses as dichotomous a situation as you could imagine.

Seen as a learning and personal development scheme, conflict with the organisation and alienation of people involved on either side of the fence can detract from its effectiveness and thus people's use of it. However, beyond a certain point in its expansion, the network may provide an oasis which becomes self sufficient and which then facilitates the personal changes which will eventually change the organisation itself. My belief is that this critical point is being approached and recent hostile reaction by senior management seems to support my diagnosis.

Obviously the organisation development implications are an exciting part of this strategy which I have only alluded to in this note. It is my hope that the forthcoming power struggle will be successful for the forces of enlightenment, but whatever the result, I consider the value which individuals have derived justifies the effort.

However, anyone contemplating the use of counselling or similarly freeing approaches, must accept the far reaching implications of such an intervention.

I hope to cover the OD side and examine the learning strategies more fully in a projected paper which Frank Rosier and I are considering on *Untraining the Scientist* and I would be pleased if anyone interested in this topic would contact me.