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## **THE CHALLENGE OF A COURSE IN COUNSELLING SKILLS**

In this paper I plan to look at the challenges which present themselves to students on a self-directed learning course in counselling skills. A student on a traditional course is presented with material by the teacher who then assesses her ability to learn and master the material. The student on a self-directed course is asked to discover, with the help of tutors and fellow students, what she wants to learn and then to come up with suggestions for how she will learn this. In theory, anything is possible as a learning objective, but in practice, students, especially in their first year, chose to learn what tutors offer. By the final year students often teach each other and offer workshops in aspects of counselling not offered by the tutors. To do this, the student moves from a position of believing the tutors are responsible for her learning to a position of recognizing her own skills and taking responsibility for finding the resources to learn what she wants to know. There is no way of mapping out how this happens. It does not happen for all students and for some it only occurs when they leave the course.

The Oxford dictionary has several meanings for the word "course". One is "a series of lectures or lessons or exercises, curriculum". When students first come on the course, they think of it in this way. They may not want this type of course, but it is still what they think of as being a course. A second meaning is, "going on in space or time, direction followed by a river". Expectations of what our experiences will be are influenced by our ideas of what a course is or should be. After being at a South West London College for a while, many of the students begin to have a sense of themselves finding their way through a chosen terrain; meeting and recognizing limitations and possibilities along the way. In this mode their movements are not shaped by someone else's idea of what they should be, but they progress as a stream of water moves, following its own inclinations and meanderings.

The student at South West London College is being encouraged to suspend her self consciousness of herself on a course and to be fully present in both her strength and her vulnerability. Many of us have

learned to keep both these aspects of ourselves hidden. It is in planning our learning and in taking responsibility for the course that we become so involved that we forget our inhibitions over revealing aspects of ourselves to others. It's almost as if the task is to forget the task and to become who we genuinely are and then to return to the task without the restrictions we had placed on ourselves in our endeavour to jump through a set of hoops laid out for us by someone else. It is my belief that by participating as both clients and counsellors on the course, we learn to accept our strengths and our limitations and to meet them with an openness and acceptance that is new to us.

I was a student on the course before I became a tutor and, therefore, have two perspectives on it. As a student I recall how often I was trying to put across a particular image of myself as someone who could cope with my life and as a person who wanted to help others out of a sense of altruism. I wanted to be seen as someone who had few if any difficulties and who wanted to help others because I was kind. It was, therefore, very difficult for me to place myself in the role of a client with honesty and willingness to explore what came up. My memory is often of myself, watching myself and saying, "Phew, you got through that one without giving away too much". This meant I carried around an anxiety about giving too much away and that for much of the time a part of me remained hidden to insure that I would be awarded a diploma by my fellow students. There were always a few students I was honest with, but they were carefully chosen. At times I thought other students were hiding as well but would not challenge them for fear of bringing the attention onto myself. It would all be seen as projection which it was in part. When I was feeling particularly isolated, I thought everyone else was completely open and wonderful and only I had unacceptable bits to hide away.

Other memories have to do with the times when I allowed myself to stop hiding and to be fully present in some work I was doing. On these occasions I felt as though I was in a different sort of time; it was not clock time, not calculated time, but real time, my time, and I felt truly in relation to the people I was working with. I could then be more fully in touch with my energy and my desires. I recall a dream workshop I was doing with Gaie Houston. I was following her instructions and telling her my dream and then becoming the parts of my dream when she asked me how I was feeling then and there in the group and was it anything like the feeling I had had in my dream. I looked around and for the first time in that group I actually saw the faces of the other people in the workshop. I saw

their concern, interest, boredom, sadness and curiosity. After the work was completed, I felt more truly myself than I had ever felt on the course. For the first time I understood that to be successful on the course was to be able to forget the "successful" me and to allow my genuine self to emerge and to become engaged with others. I could then understand, perhaps for the first time, that to lose yourself **is** to find yourself.

We are often seduced by our own image and we seduce others with it. If we've been successful in school, it's usually because we have been able to guess what our teachers wanted of us and to make ourselves into that person. We have learned to be compliant rather than independent and creative. Those who have not been successful at school often get into the game of saying, "the course is no good anyway" or "I won't try so it doesn't matter if I fail". Whatever our particular game is, and there are as many games as there are people; they are habits and difficult to change. Even though we are told that we are on a self-directed course, we cannot throw off our life-time strategies in a short time. When we do, we feel unprotected and vulnerable. It's hard to imagine that we can be on a course that values us for being the people we are. It is often difficult for tutors who also have their games and strategies for surviving and who may value students more when their strategies support the tutor's own. The fairy godmother is on the look out for Cinderella and Red Riding Hood is always fooled by the wolf.

I am not suggesting that students give up their strategies for survival. We need our ways of working in the world and without them we feel unprotected. Nor am I saying that students should learn to stop playing "Kick me" and instead start playing "I Got Here First". What I am suggesting is that students find a place on the course where they feel safe enough and challenged enough to let go of their strategies and experiment with a more spontaneous approach to the task of learning counselling skills. Once they do this and discover that they are versatile and creative, they then feel that they have a wider range of choice of responses in their work and in other situations they are involved in. The place where they can often first experiment with letting their defenses down is in the position of client. To do this, they forget or ignore their position as students on a course and enjoy the feeling of being accepted and valued by other students and staff. Students can do this when there is an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. They need to suspend their anxieties about getting or not getting a diploma and be willing to jump into untravelled waters and encounter what is there to be met in themselves and in their relations with others.

On the South West London College course we are inviting students to take part in large group decisions and in the structuring of the course and then to reflect on the nature of their participation. In most workshops we are encouraging students to spend time with each other as clients and as counsellors so that they are revealing their strengths as counsellor and as client and their limitations in each position. The notion of assessment by fellow students and staff is always in the background - more for some students than for others. I have no doubt that there are students who have calculated every bit of the way and got through it all without revealing much of themselves. They probably learned some skills on the way and hopefully have been able to improve their work situations, but they have missed something of importance. They were awarded their diploma and their satisfaction was that they passed the course. I am more interested in the students who have met the full challenge of the course and who perhaps did get a sense of themselves as being fully present as they found their own direction. These students have learned more than the skills that were being taught. They have learned to be with themselves as they are and to be open to their own experiences. As counsellors, this is what we hope we can do for our clients. In some way the course facilitates this for students. This is not something mystical that happens, nor is it entirely predictable. It is at the heart of most counselling practice and it is difficult if not impossible to be an effective and aware counsellor if you have not experienced it in some way yourself.

By being a self-directed course and one that is basically experiential, we have created a situation where some students feel they are genuinely being encouraged to be the people they are rather than the students we wish them to be. This is difficult for staff as well for students. We are all juggling our roles as student, teacher, client and counsellor. It is difficult for staff as we have our own ideas about the sort of people we think make good counsellors and yet we know we will not teach anyone anything of value by encouraging them to conform to our idea of an effective counsellor. We have to trust ourselves and students in the process of discovering our own styles, strengths and ways of being together.

It is difficult to speak for the staff collectively since we all have very different backgrounds and approaches. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a common thread interwoven through the fabric of the course which is Rogerian in spirit and which says that if we encourage students to find their own way in a situation where they feel accepted and valued, they will discover ways which lead to a

sense of greater responsibility for their learning and more self awareness about the way they live their lives. In order to fully appreciate this possibility, students have to allow thoughts of themselves as students on a course and anxieties over being assessed to recede into the background. It is like the Gestalt picture where you can either see two faces looking at each other, or a chalice. You cannot see both at the same time, but you can shift back and forth between the two images at your own speed and to your own rhythm. Once you are able to do this shifting for yourself, you can then appreciate the different nuances of each perspective. You can enjoy being student when that is appropriate and you can shift into the position of client or counsellor when you want to move to a different rhythm. Assessment ceases to be the pivot around which you move and you can then explore the richness and variety of your possibilities for being yourself and for being with others.

When I speak of the difficulty of being honest to ourselves in the role of student, I am referring to students who have been through an examination orientated educational system for most of their lives as pupils. The meaning of "to educate" is not only "to train", but "to bring forth and to draw out". This is rarely done in traditional places of education where students are taught a syllabus and then examined on it. If education were a process of "drawing out", there would not be the difficulties and conflicts to be met that I have described. We have all learned to produce what people expect us to produce. Students and staff at South West London College often find the unlearning of this response both frightening and exhilarating.

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