

Jane Read

## SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AT SOUTH WEST LONDON COUNSELLING COURSES

### *A Personal View.*

The South West London College Diploma in Counselling and Interpersonal skills is described as a course based on the ideal of self directed learning. It is an experiential course, concentrating on self and peer assessment, with the requirements and process of the final assessment being developed by the student body. I decided to do this course because I thought the idea of experiential self directed learning was very important. I had been working as a counsellor in the pregnancy and abortion field for several years, and felt that I did not want a "heavy", academic, theory based course, involving a lot of written work. I wanted something which would test me and my counselling practice. I felt I needed to develop an understanding of the way I work, and my theoretical base. I also wanted to have the opportunity to practise my counselling with my peers. This meant that I wanted to spend some time looking at the various theories of counselling, and fit them with my practice. It seemed that this course, with its emphasis on student responsibility was ideal.

The first residential, a 'planning' weekend, fulfilled my expectations and my fears. Here was a group of people, some working as counsellors, some in social work, some in voluntary work, teachers, nurses, - all with a special interest in counselling and its practice. Having said that I wanted a course where my counselling and I would be tested, the first experience of this was quite frightening. Imagine, if you will, forty-five students fighting to get what they want onto the timetable; the assumptions, justifications, earnestness, enthusiasm, needs, and fun involved in that, and the learning! A glimpse of how big groups work, a realisation of my own determination, and irritations, an understanding of the process involved in getting a task done, the splinter groups, the persuasiveness, the winning over, the co-operation and negotiation and anger.

It seemed to me that some of the group felt delighted and freed to make choices and decisions, and that others in the group felt lost and bewildered, and turned to the staff group for help in sorting this out, preferring perhaps to have a timetable imposed which would reflect what 'they' thought 'we' ought to have, to discovering more immediately what they wanted and why.

This staff/student group dynamic has been, in our community, a constant theme throughout the three years. Many students have gained confidence, skills, expertise and have become more resourceful. Some feel, still, that staff are somehow 'better' than students, and feel deprived and disconcerted by what is seen by them as a lack of staff involvement, a withdrawal of specialist skills. Certainly, the staff do have their areas of skill and speciality. For myself, I feel that the course has offered me resources in terms of staffing, information and skills, and that I can now feel free to make use of them through staff or students as appropriate. This has meant that for me, so far in this final year, my workshops 'The politics of counselling' and 'TA and Sex' have, for the most part, been student resourced, an experience from which I've learned a lot, in terms of checking out theory, risk-taking, and trying out new ideas.

The other side of this self directedness, is that many times during the course, we as a student body have come up against decisions, made in the administration of the college, about which we could do very little or nothing. The ideal of self direction, it appeared, could only take place in isolation. Personally, I don't see this as being quite true. As individuals, counsellors, and students, we may aim for self direction, which has to exist within the wider context of family, organisation, college.

Ultimately, as counsellors, we work within the whole community, and the skills, structures and practise of self-directed learning, teaching and living will jostle for position with other priorities; money, housing, family, partnerships. A awareness of choices and compromises as they are being made, so that they can be made in a responsible way, seems to me to be one of the most important pieces of learning for me over the last three years.

This does not take into account another facet of the difficulties involved in self-directed learning. This is the unconscious, and sometimes conscious, direction given to us by the staff group. In some cases this has taken the form of norms being developed within the community of which a awareness only came later. For example, that

the way a student interacts in the large community group, being in some way a measure of that student's competence and capability as a counsellor. This may or may not be so. My point is that this 'norm' was allowed by us to grow in the community, but appears originally to have come from an extra validity being given by the staff to large group interaction. In many ways it seems unfair to pass this onto the 'staff group'. My own feeling is that many of the staff have particular interests and skills in certain fields, and that this is what we have used them for. That certain skills should be emphasized is almost bound to happen on such a course - after all the staff have done a lot of self-directed learning too - and it is hard for students to separate an individual staff members' legitimate interests in practising certain skills, from an invidious paranoia about 'that staff group' and 'what they're doing to us'.

The course has given me the opportunity to look closely at various theories and models of counselling, and through the nature of the course has allowed me space to look at what counselling means for me.

As has become apparent for me during the writing of this, one of my chief areas of interest and learning is about the self-directed nature of our lives, or otherwise. I see this as relevant to the lives of my clients, caught perhaps in circumstances they see themselves as powerless to control or change.

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