

TOWARDS THE TRAINING AND RECOGNITION OF COUNSELLORS IN PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC SETTINGS

by Geoffrey Whitfield

Geoffrey Whitfield is a psychotherapist and teaches counselling in Brighton

Counselling and Psychotherapy training is abounding and I state the obvious in saying there is a need to define what makes an adequate training. Students and future clients need to have some kind of assurance that the training offered adheres to some kind of quality that can be validated.

Increasingly there is a knowledge of public accountability and it does seem that we could be sensitive to acquiring the highest possible standards for:

- (a) our own sakes
- (b) for the benefit and trust of fellow professionals
- (c) for the benefit of the wider public

However, the old chestnut is, what are those highest possible standards, and how are they to be measured? There are three priorities I would wish to indicate, are prevailing at the present time, none of which are entirely satisfactory:

The Academic World

By awarding a degree, universities and colleges have been able to state with confidence to the public and the learning community, that a person has satisfactorily undergone a course in training. Unfortunately this does not, in the case of Counselling, mean that they are equipped to work with people at the level of competence. They may be. But there are many highly qualified people with little ability to work at the interface and interheart of a person. Moreover, they may not be able to apply what they have learned in the often bewildering variety of issues contained within the presenting material of the client, to say nothing of what is triggered off in the counsellor's own process.

All too often people left places of higher education with excellent degrees, but who were unable to work with engines, bridges, buildings and bodies. It took many years to develop courses where degrees consisted of applied as well as pure theoretical material.

The question for degree awarding bodies in Counselling is similar. How do you enable a person to have the theory and **demonstrate** that they can use and apply those theories with another human soul? An essay, a thesis or a set of examination questions requiring written answers are scarcely creative contributions to the questions of qualification, accreditation or recognition.

Yet the public and administrators of organisations feel reassured that if one has a recognisable degree from an institution, that is some sort of reassurance. But reassurance for what? Competence? Not necessarily so.

Thus, it is hoped that the Academic world will honour its trust for respectability and intellectual integrity and seek to award qualifications which reflect whether the person can work with another human being when the examinations are over. Thus much remains to be done within that world, because people will turn to academia with the expectation that their degree will enable them to be seen as effective. But what happens when they meet the "Professional World"?

The Professional World

Professional bodies want to know if the person can work effectively at a given task. "Don't tell me how many degrees you have in Theology - tell me if you can communicate with people about God" - so said the older cleric to a newly ordained curate. Similarly, we could say "Don't tell me about your PhD in Counselling, or your Masters in Psychology; if you want to work with people, can you do so effectively? And how can I know by what you bring on your piece of paper?" Thus, quite rightly, professionally orientated courses want to ensure that their courses are experiential as well as theoretical, so that they can pass muster with heads held high, because their products **can** work with people or they would not complete the course successfully. Their principles will include questions like "Not only have you learned the theory: can you use it and apply it and integrate it with other theories?" They will provide considerable space for the use and application of counselling theory by consistent counselling practice **within** the course with their peer guinea pigs and **not** let them practice on the poor, unsuspecting public outside. It will become clear whether or not the counselling student has learned and mastered the relevant theory by the fluency or lack of it as they practice it. And ample space will be given for students to fumble and flounder as they progress from their early stages of practice to the place of competence.

If, at the end of the day, the concern of the professional is "Don't tell me, show me", how can he or she provide conditions which also ensure that theoretical issues are given full and appropriate consideration and attention. All too often, it can easily come about that students from certain less disciplined environments, are guided more by intuition than theory instead of a working balance of the two. How does the professional trainer ensure that professional trainees are working from those sublime theories and methodologies so that they have an internal set of linked circuits which make sense, separately and conjoined? And how are they to represent that kind of competence to the public? - something that AHPP must continue to

be concerned for in their links with HIPS and UKSCP. The Self, Peer and Tutorial Assessment model is one that is effective as long as it contains the rigour to deal with theory and practice. Not to do this means that professionals in the field will rightly be inclined to be restrained in their enthusiasm for courses seeking to turn out "Professional Counsellors".

Inevitably, this leads to the place of supervision. The mark of an inexperienced professional was that he or she needed supervision until they were working "without supervision". That was a sought after standard - but beware if it is applied to professional Counsellors. If they are inexperienced or very experienced, they will need supervision. The medieval craft model falls down here. We used to think we moved from Apprentice to Journeyman and on to Master, and the Master had an Apprentice. Now we know that the Master is till a Journeyman and even an Apprentice if he is a professional Counsellor, for he is always learning.

I strongly believe that courses which profess to be professionally based for would-be professionals to train to work in professional settings, see a responsibility to provide supervision for those who have successfully completed their course and are working with people. To me it is a sign of their professional awareness. Not everyone will agree. Not all have the resources. But some are increasingly alarmed at what professional and academic training bodies recommend as supervision for students without considering whether a recognising body would consider that an applicant has received appropriate supervision from an appropriate person i.e. not just another counsellor per se.

So the professional trainer has to be at least a Janus brain or more, with eyes in more than one direction - on his own course, and the students therein that ultimately they can leave and work competently with people; on the professional bodies who will demand standards that indicate a competence that is demonstrated and measured, going beyond merely a person attended a course and passed written examinations; and on the post-graduate responsibility for good practice for professionals i.e. supervision and on-going training and personal development.

All this leaves out the critical issue of Personal Therapy or its equivalent. To me, it is to state the obvious. This is an on-going theme for any serious person, but one which must be taken on, either during the training period or immediate supervision period. Any course that does not provide for the on-going growth of its students by way of facilities for personal discovery and growth and professional development, must seriously ask what are its viable alternatives. Otherwise we are in danger of becoming without discipline, or the rigours of methodological principles and practice.


The Non-Academic Non-Professional

Hopefully, we shall always have maverick people who ignore or break the rules - but they had better have standards that stand up! Let those who wish to, make their protests about standards and regulations, of enquiry and public accountability, about oppressions and elitism, but don't tell me only what you are against, show me what you are for and let us join together, because at the end of the day we are humble students of our own souls if we are to enter the portals of the human condition.

Conclusion

I do not see it as my task here to put forward my own procedures for the "accreditation" of students, although that could always come later. However, it would be a useful part of a cocktail to continue with other ingredients offered by those who run courses.

Therefore, let me end on a creative note, which is to invite all who run significant training courses for counsellors, who would like to meet and share together, to write and let me know. Then we could arrange to meet one Saturday (or Sunday) in London or Brighton. Out of this could emerge some creative thinking as an offering to the total movement of the training and recognition of Counsellors.



metanoia, which means **change** or **transformation**, is an Institute and associated Organisations which have been active in the field of individual, group and organisational change for many years. A full range of psychological services is provided from corporate, team and individual **assessment, counselling** and individual, family or group psychotherapy as well as **organisational development** and **consultation**. We also offer workshops such as **Health & Healing, Bereavement, Assertion Training, Communication Skills, Stress Management** (for individuals and public and private organisations) and 2/3-day **Introductory Workshops in Transactional Analysis, Gestalt and Counselling**, as well as qualifying Diploma Courses in **Counselling, Psychotherapy, Supervision, Integrative and Organisational Training/Consultancy**.

For further information, please contact: Dr Petruska Clarkson
metanoia Psychotherapy Training Institute
13 North Common Road, London W5 2QB. Tel: 081 579 2505.