THE COMPETENT COUNSELLOR

by Anthony Crouch PhD

Anthony Crouch lives and works as a counsellor and trainer in Glaston-
bury. In this article he describes A SET OF 33 COMPETENCE STATE-
MENTS that seek to "define" a competent counsellor

What does a counsellor need to be able to do and "be" in order to be considered competent? I believe the 33 COMPETENCE STATEMENTS present a rich picture of the necessary counsellor awareness, personal work, theoretical understandings and casework skills that "make up" a professional counsellor. They are precise and systematic and yet sufficiently flexible to encompass a wide variety of particular counselling approaches - the statements refer equally well to the cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, psychodynamic or psychological counsellor.

I have designed the statements primarily as a tool for the training and education of counsellors. They enable both students and tutors to have a basic framework within which to work and they give control to students in the sense that counselling becomes a less vague and thus less mysterious art. They also give direction by defining what students are working to develop and provide the group with a common agreement about their common task. Finally, by providing such a clear structure a space opens up - for each competency statement is "open-ended" in terms of its achievement and its manner of achievement. Competency is thus seen as competency to learn - not a static state.

The statements are a connected set. Connected in the sense that numbers 2 build on numbers 1 and numbers 3 on numbers 2. Connected also in the sense that although the statements are divided into four categories (counsellor awareness, personal development, theoretical understandings and casework skills) they need to be developed together - all number 1s together, all number 2s together etc. There are nine statements in the first three categories and six in the casework category starting with number 4 which is where, in the student's development, working with clients can begin.

Counsellor Awareness

A.1 Has developed the empathic awareness and skills to explore with clients their problems and their worlds.

A.2 Has developed awareness and skills in supporting and challenging clients appropriately.

A.3 Has developed awareness and skills in forming, sustaining and ending relationships with clients.

A.4 Has developed awareness and skills in working therapeutically with the client's personal history.

A.5 Has developed awareness and skills in working therapeutically with the client's patterns of social relating.

A.6 Has developed the intuitive and creative awareness necessary for the deep reflection of patterns, connections and themes.

A.7 Has developed facility with a range of intervention, methods and techniques.

A.8 Has developed ongoing awareness of the client-counsellor relationship.

A.9 Has developed awareness of working with the client's internal and external boundaries.

Personal Work

P.1 Has begun to explore him/herself through self- disclosure and being present with others in a.genuine way.

P.2 Has developed a ground of trust in self and other, sufficient to both support and challenge and be supported and challenged.

P.3 Has worked through primary personal issues of beginning, sustaining and ending relationships.

P.4 Has explored his/her personal history in both self-supportive and challenging ways.

P.5 Has explored his/her personal patterns of relating and sexuality in both self-supportive and challenging ways.

P.6 Has honestly examined his/her "bad" and "dark" side as well as that which is more acceptable and related this to the desire to counsel others.

P.7 Has worked on the developmental origins of his/her personal issues and patterns such that similar issues are not avoided and/or acted out in work with clients.

P.8 Has worked on personal relationship issues (for example "rejection by others") such that these interpersonal experiences are not avoided and/or acted out in work with clients.

P.9 Has explored, supported and challenged his/her personal internal boundaries and ways of creating external boundaries.

Theoretical Understanding

T.1   Has explored the nature, practise and objectives of counselling.

T.2   Has examined ways of working with a broad selection of client groups and client problems.

T.3   Has examined ethical and practice issues including the need for supervision, support and ongoing monitoring of professional competence.

T.4   Has explored theories of human development and their relevance to counselling.

T.5   Has explored theories of human relating, sexuality and group-life as they relate to counselling.

T.6   Has explored theories of human nature and their implications for counselling practice.

T.7   Has explored theories of the development of client problems.

T.8   Has explored theories of the client-counsellor relationship.

T.9   Has examined theories of psychopathology and explored the professional boundaries of counselling.

Casework Skills

C.4   Has developed the skills of confidential record keeping and presentation of client work in supervision.

C.5   Has developed skills in the application of learnings within the training group to work with clients.

C.6   Has developed skills in the effective presentation of his/her awareness, skills and understandings through case studies.

C.7   Has developed skills in identifying and creating necessary support and supervision for both personal and client needs.

C.8   Has developed skills in working within organisational and inter-agency contexts.

C.9   Has developed skills in developing referral contacts and presenting his/her services to appropriate bodies.

I designed these statements as a tool for counsellör training and education and they are therefore also relevant to the assessment and accreditation of counsellor competence. The statements are, however, "open-ended" in that most of them define a goal that can never be fully reached. When I watch a video of Carl Rogers or Brian Thorne working, for example, I clearly realise that as far as A.1 empathic awareness and skills I have personally a lot to develop. Nor is there a time when I can say "I've explored my personal history now - that's it!" (P.4)

Rather than hoops to jump through, the competence statements are places to aim for, seeds to grow, landscapes to examine.

How then can someone be assessed as competent or not? Let us consider what we mean by "competence". Is it only a "skill" that one has - like riding a bicycle or driving a car? Clearly, although there are skills such as the use of open questions or paraphrasing (which form part of the achievement of A.1) empathy is a qualitatively different kind of skill from e.g. driving a car. That is why I have chosen to use the word "awareness" as well as the word "skill" and emphasised that competence is a competence to learn rather than a static "having achieved something".

I like the image of a paintbox where each competency goal is a colour or texture with which each individual counsellor creates their own pictures of counselling. I also like this metaphor because it reflects, for me, something of the "beauty" that is competent counselling - the competent counsellor flows, makes connections, deep reflections, is there, is not there, works like a craftsperson or artist. If we cannot allow this creativeness into our definitions and accreditation of counsellors then we are losing touch with the right hemispheric and somatic areas of our skills and intelligence.

We cannot effectively assess and accredit counsellors in a simply rational way and "at a distance" - we need to utilise our rational and intuitive judgement, our feelings and somatic knowing. How can a counsellor be assessed and accredited by an application form "at a distance"? Apart from it being an impoverished method it is a model of the very opposite of what counselling is about - the forming of a developmental relationship.

With the 33 statements (as a basic framework of agreement) it is possible to make useful assessments of the stages of a student's competencies within the richness of the training and supervisory relationships. What is needed, therefore, is a system for decentralising accreditation to trainers and supervisors based upon an agreed framework such as the one outlined here.

Finally, don't just accept this system of competencies - if you are interested in it please test it out, challenge it and only accept that which, rationally and intuitively, makes sense to you. And then write to *Self and Society* about your experience.